

SHE-HULK IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN!

2015

NOPE

JORDAN PEELE'S
NEW UFO HORROR

DR WHO AND THE DALEKS

PETER CUSHING'S CLASSIC
'60S MOVIES REGENERATE

RESIDENT EVIL

THE ZOMBIE GAME GETS
A LIVE-ACTION SERIES

THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS

EXPLORING THE UNSEEN
TELEVISION ADAPTATION

#1 SCI-FI
MAG IN THE
UNIVERSE!

THE SANDMAN

NEIL GAIMAN'S COMIC BOOK
MASTERPIECE AWAKENS

PREY

THE PREDATOR IS BACK... IN TIME!





PLUS! THE BOYS | DC LEAGUE OF SUPER-PETS | DOCTOR WHO | LUCK | PAPER GIRLS | BATMAN
WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS | JURASSIC WORLD | ENGLISH ROSE | 2000 AD | HIGHLANDER

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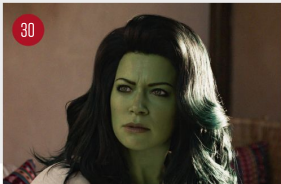
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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Strange New Worlds* just keeps getting better and better.
→ Loving the scale and depth of *The Orville* – it feels like there's more danger this time.

RANTS

→ Can everything just pause for a couple of days so I can catch up on a load of sci-fi shows? Thanks.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ As it's a 10-minute bus trip, I popped into Bristol city centre while *Doctor Who* was filming there for a quick gawp. Missed David Tennant, but spotted Neil Patrick Harris. I live in the Whoniverse! So exciting!

→ Top of my to-read pile: Nigel Kneale's 1949 short story collection *Tomato Cain*, just reissued by Comma Press: bit.ly/knealetomato
→ Enjoyed Alex Garland's *Men* a lot, but then it was pretty much tailored for folk horror/body horror nuts like me.

→ Record fair purchase of the month: a disco version of the *Alien* theme! A fiver well spent... bit.ly/alien Disco

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RANTS

→ Wasn't sure what to expect from *Strange New Worlds* but it's far and away my favourite of the recent *Trek* offerings. So on point. Anson Mount gives Shatner a run for his money in the charisma stakes too!

→ Ms Marvel's the most entertaining superhero since Tom Holland rebooted Spider-Man. Surely a second season is a must?

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RANTS

→ Can we please stop with the "musical" episodes of normal dramas, where everyone bursts into song and dance? It was innovative when Dennis Potter did it in 1976, but feels increasingly dated and gimmicky now.

→ The amount of stuff on certain streaming services that is entirely without subtitles is shocking. This is (just one of the reasons) why shiny discs are better!

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Ms Marvel manages to make me feel absolutely ancient – and utterly charmed. One of the freshest-feeling things Marvel has done in quite a while.

→ *Obi-Wan Kenobi* redeemed itself with that final episode. Still not entirely convinced it was a story that needed to be told – and I think I've finally succumbed to Tatooine fatigue.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ If you want an alternative to blockbusters this summer, seek out *Marcel The Shell With Shoes On*. It's funny and poignant, with clever stop-motion animation, all about a tiny talking shell wrestling with life's big mysteries.

→ Ms Marvel is the best Marvel Studios Disney+ series since *Hawkeye*. Iman's Kamala is a charismatic, fresh face and her story feels entirely different and unique for the MCU.



Captain's Log

It's a fun photograph!



We're usually so busy putting *SFX* together that quite often we forget to stop and smell the roses. There was a moment, while working on this edition, where I got quite excited about just how much is crammed within the pages. That's not me blowing our trumpet – though obviously our small but perfectly formed team does an incredible job every four weeks – that's just acknowledging, once again, that we're blessed to live in a golden age of genre "content". (A silly word, but I think we're stuck with it.)

And, I have to say, we at *SFX* are blessed to get the access we do – thanks to a legacy of loving genre releases for almost 30 years in print. We're fans first and foremost, just like you, so it's still a thrill to be able to bring you the material that we know our readers, and fellow fans, will love too. For this issue, Ian's done a deep dive into the '60s Dalek movies and the version of *Midwich Cuckoos* you've never seen. I went back in time with the Predator – whose new look is so secret I'm not sure anyone's actually seen it yet!

Tara gets up close and personal with the creators of *She-Hulk*, Will showcases his adoration for the *Sandman* series and Nick pins down Jordan Peele to find out exactly what *Nope* is all about. Where else can you find all that under one roof? I'm so glad you're still with us to enjoy it – tell your friends to pick up a copy! See you back here in four weeks...

Darren
x



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AUGUST
2022



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GOING TO THE DOGS

Jared Stern talks *DC League
Of Super-Pets*

Highlights



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DOCTOR WHO

→ Time to carefully rearrange those Target novels as a new batch hits the shelves!



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PAPER GIRLS

→ A time war starts the day after Halloween – can't we even get a bit of a lie-in?



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CAMP CRETACEOUS

→ The *Jurassic World* animated spin-off returns for one last hectic season.

WRITER/DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Ruff Justice

Good boys!
Enter the
ultimate paw
patrol in
**DC League Of
Super-Pets**

Superman
shares a
moment
with Krypto.



LIKE ANY SUPERHERO TALE WORTH ITS CAPE,

DC League Of Super-Pets has its very own secret origin story. "I was volunteering in a pet shelter," says writer and director Jared Stern, sharing the inspiration for the new animated movie that unites the furriest forces for justice in the DC Universe. "There was a bunch of really cute kittens in the front and I thought, 'Okay, those kittens have a pretty decent chance of being adopted'. And then there was this back room, with some older pets, and I was like, 'I don't think these guys have as good a shot at getting out of here'. And I was bummed about that.

"I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if they could somehow get out of here – and what if they had superpowers?' I don't know why, but that came into my head. At the time I was working on *The Lego Batman Movie*, and I thought, 'Well, there are all these DC superhero pets. What if I somehow squished these ideas together?'"

Super-pets have been a cherished part of comic book mythology for decades, yet somehow they've never made the leap to live action on the big screen. Are they just too guilty a pleasure for the likes of Christopher Nolan and Zack Snyder?

"I think it's because they're too cool and too badass!" laughs Stern. "Yeah, it could have seemed kitsch and silly. And I'll be honest, in some ways it is, right? We didn't shy away from how fun and silly

it can be. For example there's a guinea pig that shoots a laser out of its mouth in this movie, and I'm happy about that!

"But we thought it could also be awesome. There's no reason that you couldn't use these characters to tell a really cool superhero movie story, with great action in it. And also it's emotionally involving, because we are all attached to our pets in a very emotional way. And they are attached to us. When superheroes save the day they care about people, but no one cares



“Yeah, it could have seemed kitsch and silly. And I'll be honest, in some ways it is”



about a person more than a pet – that's their owner and their best friend.”

An A-list voice cast includes Dwayne Johnson as Krypto, the Mutt of Steel. “Krypto's a little cocky and into himself,” Stern tells Red Alert, “and nobody does that better than Dwayne. But he also has a warmth to him, a real sweetness, that you may not think of, and that is really great, especially for the relationship with Superman. You get the sense that Krypto really loves him, and that if anything bad were to happen to him, if they were separated, it would break his heart. And I think Dwayne really nailed that combination – kinda cocky, but he's a bit of a softie.”

The critterastic team-up also brings us Keanu Reeves as Batman, master of Ace the Bat-hound. “Keanu's take on Batman is brilliant. It's tricky because there have been so many Batmen, in live action and animation. I worked on *Lego Batman* so I was like, ‘Oh man, how are we going to top that?’

“Keanu brought this wonderful specificity to it. I would best describe it as haunted. He's a little bit of a weirdo, a little antisocial, and maybe just a little bit crazy. Most importantly, he's a funny version of Batman – and a Batman who desperately needs a pet! Keanu really had a good time. He made himself laugh a lot, and it

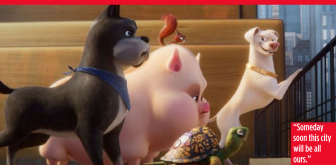
was great knowing he enjoyed it. I'd love to go make a Keanu Reeves Batman movie!”

As Stern reveals, the look of *DC League Of Super-Pets* homages the clean, vibrant visuals of classic American comic books, with an equally retro nod to the Fleischer Studios Superman cartoons of the 1940s. “One of the ideas that we had early on was to lean into that era, because it just felt right, like it fitted these characters and this world of DC. So we played with certain references from that era, whether it was Art Deco-style architecture or *Saturday Evening Post* painted covers.

“When CG animation first came out everyone was going, ‘How real can we make this look?’ You'd get blown away, like, ‘My God, those waves look just like waves in the ocean!’ And now we've got to a point where there are so many CG effects in live-action movies it's all kind of squished together. So it's like, ‘Okay, we know you can make it look real, but can you make it look interesting now? Can you make it graphic in some way?’

“There have been wonderful films like *Into The Spider-Verse* and *The Mitchells Vs The Machines*. We're trying our own version of that, with a slightly more painterly look that lends itself to that era.” **NS**

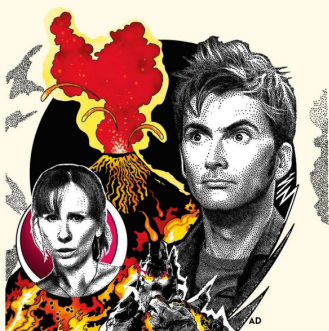
DC League Of Super-Pets is in cinemas from 29 July.



AUTHORS EXCLUSIVE

Roman Roads

James Moran and Rona Munro have turned their Roman-era **Doctor Who** episodes into prose



Anthony Dry's cover art honours Chris Achilleos.

THE REVIVED TARGET RANGE of *Doctor Who* books continues this month, with two more episodes novelised by their original writers. James Moran adapts 2008's "The Fires Of Pompeii", in which the Tenth Doctor must choose between letting Vesuvius erupt or allowing the alien Pyroviles to transform humanity. Meanwhile, Rona Munro tackles "The Eaters Of Light", in which the Twelfth Doctor learns that the Roman Ninth Legion's disappearance is due to an other-dimensional creature.

For Moran, who grew up reading the Target books, it's a particular thrill. "They were my window into all the stories I assumed I'd never get to see," he tells Red Alert. "I'd scour my local library and second-hand shops every single week, hoping to find one I hadn't read."

A second Doctor book was a favourite: "The Abominable Snowmen. Maybe because it was such an older Doctor to the one I was watching on TV. It felt so exotic and mysterious. There was another I remember reading over and over—one of the Dalek ones. There was a big tractor beam pulling things up. I remember picturing that and thinking, 'That'd be amazing!'"

Over 25 years later, he got the chance to write for the show itself, a process he calls "a whirlwind." "They'd wanted to do a Pompeii episode from the first series, but realised it was too expensive to do properly. By the time that year came around, they knew they could pull it off. A big part was they had access to the sets from the TV series *Rome*."

“What’s the point of being a Who fan if I can’t explain something in obsessive detail?”

He was given a shopping list. "They said, 'You can have X amount of pages on these street sets. We'll need X amount inside the Roman family's villa. We want some fire monsters. And when the eruption happens we want some sort of spaceship or escape pod to come out, with people inside. Off you go!' That was May, and they were filming in September."

Early drafts were "a lot more talky", he says. He's now been able to reinstate some of that material. "The shooting script was the basis. Then I went through everything else I'd done, going, 'Was there something good that was just trimmed for pacing?' You can be more talky in a book, so quite a few things did go back in. There's more little tangents, and more insight into what Donna's thinking."

He's also been able to set some critics straight. "It really annoyed me when people would talk about the bit where they defeat the footsoldier Pyrovile [by throwing water on it], and be like, 'Oh, bucket of water—they're not very good, are they?'"

"In the original script there was more explanation, but in a dramatic rock-moment they're not gonna go. 'Why that happened was, scientifically speaking.' So there's more on that. What's the point of being a Doctor Who fan if I can't explain something in obsessively nerdy detail?"

Rona Munro has a different emotional connection to the range. "What got me into reading was the *Moomin* books," she says. She still has history with Target, though, having novelised her 1989 Sylvester McCoy story "Survival." "Oh, bloody hell, do I ever!" she cries, when asked if she remembers writing it. "That was

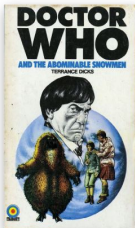


brutal. I'd just had my son, and the editor/proofreader was punitive. It was like being told by teacher how bad your spelling and grammar was. That's probably because I was getting very little sleep. Everything was coming back covered in red!"

Munro's 2017 episode was partly inspired by Rosemary Sutcliffe's children's book *The Eagle Of The Ninth*, also about the historical mystery of the



© BBC/ALAMY



James Moran read this Troughton tale over and over.



"What's Richard Osman doing in Pompeii?"

legion's fate. "I had such a childhood connection to the story, partly through reading that, and also because where the Ninth Legion probably disappeared is where I was brought up," the Scot explains. "My older brother was very invested in archaeology. We had this romanticised idea that we could find the

standard of the Ninth Legion in the fields and woods around where we lived, because that part of the world is a probable site of the final battle [Roman historian] Tacitus mentions."

The script evolved "quite a bit", she recalls. "Instinctively, I reproduced a form of story not so common now, where the Doctor and the companion get separated and have parallel stories. They didn't get reunited for a lot longer. And I had to remove things for budgetary reasons. I was very wedded to the idea of Highland cows, and they were like, 'You're not getting them'. Now the cows are back – and so's the dancing. They made me take my ceilidh out! So I put it back in."

She's also fleshed out Roman soldier Lucius, who in the TV episode briefly hit on Bill. "Originally, in my head, I had a relationship between [female Pictish leader] Kar and Bill. At that point, I didn't know the first episode ['The Pilot'] was going to be Bill's love story. Then, of course, she can't have another one. So that came out. There was an allusion to Lucius being bisexual, which was a late addition, and partly Steven [Moffat] going, 'We need to get this in' – which I thought was completely right. But it was much more satisfying to go: it's not just an aside, this is a Roman legionary who's queer, and make it a proper love story. It was good to be able to fix that."

And this time, by the sound of it, no one scolded her about her spelling... **IB**

The Fires Of Pompeii and The Eaters Of Light are out on 14 July, published by BBC Books.



NEWS WARP HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

...Jodie Whittaker... Lady Gaga in the frame for Harley Quinn in Todd Phillips's musical Joker sequel

Folie à Deux Paper Towns' Jake Schreier helming

Thunderbolts movie for Marvel

Sequel to **Ghostbusters: Afterlife** in the works from Jason Reitman

Happy Death Day's Christopher Landon to write, direct and spider-wrangle remake of **Arachnophobia**

Guy Ritchie directing live-action take on 1997's **Hercules** for Disney

Neve Campbell won't be back as Sidney Prescott in **Scream 6**

West Side Story's Rachel Zegler starting in **Hunger Games** prequel **The Ballad Of Songbirds And Snakes**

Cobra Kai team developing videogame adaptation **Duke Nukem** for Legendary Entertainment

Lindsay Beer writing and directing new version of **Sleepy Hollow**

Anime prequel **The Lord Of The Rings The War Of The Rohirrim** arriving 12 April 2024

Justin Lin adapting superhero anime **One Punch Man**



SCI-FACT! James Moran was given Asterix books to read, as "They wanted that humour, with the Latin puns."

SCI-FACT! Peggy Holmes has also worked as a choreographer. She planned out Garth's moves in Wayne's World's "Foxy Lady" sequence.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Luck Around You

Apple TV+ is taking a chance on new animation **Luck**

LUCK IS A SLIPPERY concept to pin down. Upcoming Apple TV+ animation *Luck* offers up a new perspective, however, by making it a tangible commodity, manufactured in the so-called Land of Luck.

"I didn't realise how much humans are obsessed with luck," director Peggy Holmes tells *Red Alert*. "We did tons of research and there are so many papers, books, college dissertations and lectures about the idea. It became very clear to me that one really big rule is that luck is random – you don't know when it's coming and you cannot control it. We also had to be careful about the difference

between luck and superstition – then we could start to create the rules we needed to make the story feel believable and relatable."

The movie's protagonist is Sam (played by Tony-nominated Broadway star Eva Noblezada), an 18-year-old woman afflicted with such perennial bad luck that you can almost guarantee her toast will land butter-side down. But a chance encounter with a black cat with a Scottish accent changes her fortunes forever, and before long she's following the moggy through a mysterious magical portal.

Sam becomes the first human ever to set foot in the Land of Luck, a sprawling metropolis so supercharged with good fortune

that "you don't need guard rails and you don't even need to look where you're going".

But in order to keep the universe in equilibrium, there must also be a place where everything goes wrong. "If you live in the Land of Bad Luck, you're always having to fix something," says Holmes. "But they have a great sense of humour about it, they help each other out, and there's a lot of great things that can come from bad luck."

Despite the presence of leprechauns, talking cats and dragons – whose ranks feature the

voice talents of Whoopi Goldberg, Simon Pegg and Jane Fonda, respectively – Sam's backstory is grounded in the real world. The character grew up in foster care, and is determined that her young friend Hazel is given the opportunities that were denied to her as a kid.

"Kiel [Murray, writer] and I met with these really amazing young adults who grew up in the foster care system, the same as Sam," Holmes explains. "They were so positive, generous and hard-working, and hopeful that their life will turn around. We were so touched by them and by their stories."

"They all said, 'We've had some terrible bad luck in our lives, but we wouldn't change it, because we feel like it brought us to where we are today. We wouldn't want anyone else to experience it – and we wouldn't want to go through it again – but it's part of what got us to where we are today.'"

"We just thought that was such a beautiful story," Holmes adds, "this idea of an unlucky person who thinks they're too unlucky to find family, but then ultimately, [it turns out] she isn't. We were very entertained by this idea of going into a world we've never seen before, and telling this really sweet, simple, emotional journey."

RE

Luck is on Apple TV+ from 5 August.



The Dragon (Jane Fonda), Bob (Simon Pegg) and Sam.



► **SCI-FACT!** Artist Cliff Chiang provided the production design team a "look book" of his art inspirations as a blueprint for them to interpret.



PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

It's About Time

Beloved time-travel comic **Paper Girls** gets a big-budget TV series adaptation



SEVEN YEARS AGO, IMAGE

Comics released *Paper Girls*, an original sci-fi comic series written by Brian K. Vaughan (*Saga*) and illustrated by Cliff Chiang. Set in 1988, it tells the story of how four unassuming teenage newspaper delivery girls become embroiled in a war among factions of time travellers. For temporal paradox geeks, the duo constructed the ultimate exploration of whether anyone should be allowed to tinker with the past or future, and it earned them an Eisner Award.

Shortly after the run concluded in 2019, Prime Video optioned the comic, which has now been turned into a streaming series. Camryn Jones, Riley Lai Nelet, Sofia Rosinsky and Fina Strazza star as the four acerbic teens who find their reality blown apart when they're transported through time to meet their future selves, then have to navigate home as they're hunted by other time travellers.

Vaughan and Chiang are actively involved as consultants and executive producers, alongside showrunner Christopher C. Rogers and

Christopher C. Rogers and

a writers' room and director roster made up entirely of women. The comic is rare in being written as a period piece and featuring all-female protagonists, and Vaughan tells Red Alert that the adaptation retains that unique point of view, which sets it apart from other comic book series. "I didn't want to do a book that was targeted just at one group. I wanted it to be a book for everyone that happened to feature an all-female cast," he explains. "And now *Paper Girls* has been so gratifying to watch come to life with this incredibly inclusive cast and crew. It is electrifying."

Chiang says that audiences, both male and female, responded immediately to the comic because of its feminine point of view. "It was so interesting developing the comic to see how we could go to different places simply because our cast was female, and we could touch on different things," he says. "But what I'm probably most proud of is that this group [of characters] is really diverse. When Brian sent me the pitch, he laid it out that they all come from different places, and from different backgrounds. For that also then that they all come over to the show is, for me, really important."

Christopher C. Rogers says the basic thesis of the series is: what if you met your future self, and what is the chasm between what you hoped for and who you end up being?

"We're playing those feelings we've all had," Rogers says. "And then the

Well there's no need for that, young lady.



mythology is what makes it an adventure. We love the heists, personal exploration of it, but to be able to counterpoint that with the time travel and the Time War – and these other aspects that just activate the show on a whole other level – is to be able to paint with all the colours."

Vaughan and Chiang are excited for fans of the comic to see the scale and scope with which their story has been rendered. "Everyone behind the show went for broke in this first episode, and you'll see right away *Paper Girls* is very much its own thing," Vaughan teases. "There are definitely some things, this first season, that I cannot believe they accomplished in the world of television. There's nothing else like it on the air." ■

Paper Girls is on Prime Video from 29 July.



SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Shadow Lounge

What We Do In The Shadows gets into the club scene



"Your name's not on the list, you're not coming in."



GRAB YOUR DANCING shoes and your best goth outfits, because the vampires of *What We Do In The Shadows* are opening up their very own nightclub in season four. After a season of Nandor (Kayvan Novak), Nadja (Natasha Demetriou), Laszlo (Matt Berry) and Colin Robinson (Mark Proksch) running the Vampiric Council for the American Eastern Seaboard (poorly), the vamps are changing things again and letting their freak flags fly once more.

Showrunner Paul Simms tells *Red Alert* that the bloodsuckers, who were spread out on different paths will return to cobabiate about more in their Staten Island abode. That's where Laszlo has been raising the baby that burst out of Colin Robinson's corpse in the season finale and where Nandor will begin to hunt for a wife with the help of Guillermo (Harvey Guillén). And Nadja will open a Vampire Club.

"We've always talked about how Nadja was turned into a

vampire when she was very young, and was from a small Mediterranean island and had never had a chance to be in the working world or be a boss," Simms says of the writers' room chatter. "One of the most fun things about a nightclub is she's finally getting the chance to be in charge of something and see what that power does to her."

Simms says the club and how it operates will be an ongoing story for the whole season. "The vampire nightclub is mainly for vampires, but they like to get some humans in there so that the vampires have something to drink," he laughs. "You'll see as the season progresses, like any semi-secret nightclub that would

open in New York, it attracts its share of celebrities who want to come and see what the hot new scene is. And they might not realize that they are going into a vampire nightclub and are at risk of dying."

It also opens up the door for plenty of comedians and unexpected actor cameos, which the show loves to pull off each season. "Anyone who has ever played a vampire, anywhere, will eventually appear on this show if their schedule permits it," Simms jokes.

This season will also feature the show's most ambitious episode, "The Night Market." "It's where all of the supernatural creatures in the city gather in a hidden place to

barter and trade with each other," Simms shares. "It's a really cool episode where you see not just vampires, but every kind of supernatural creature you can imagine, and some that we've never seen before, all mingling."

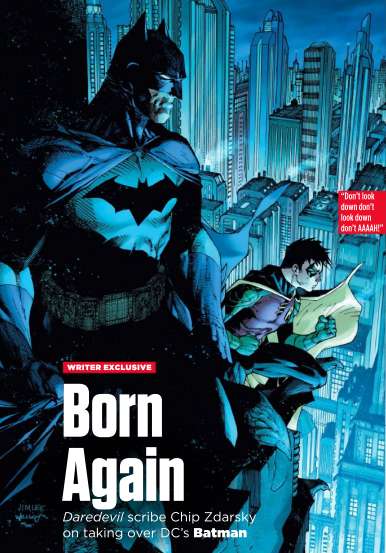
Another episode will have Laszlo, Nandor and Baby Colin go to a hunting cabin with their human neighbour Sean (Anthony Atamanuik). "You are going to see all sorts of creatures, including many that Laszlo tames by playing his magical flute," Simms laughs.

Simms says there's no shortage of stories right now. And it's a good job, given the official announcement that the show has been picked up for seasons five and six. "We do have an end in mind, but it's just a matter of figuring out when the right time to do it is," he says. "But we know we have at least two more seasons to tell, and then we'll figure out what happens after that." ■

What We Do In The Shadows is on FX, Hulu and Disney+ now.

Is Baby Colin technically underage, or not?





WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Born Again

Daredevil scribe Chip Zdarsky on taking over DC's **Batman**

“IT’S BEEN FUN WRITING BOTH ENDS OF Batman’s journey, from Bruce’s youthful hubris to his older pragmatism,” says Chip Zdarsky, who’s now taken charge of the Dark Knight’s flagship title after charting Bruce Wayne’s formative years in miniseries *Batman: The Knight*.

“There’s connective tissue there in terms of carrying some themes through to the main *Batman* book, but plot-wise they’re separate,” says Zdarsky. “I’ve been a fan across so many iterations. As a kid, I loved the ‘60s TV show and then I discovered the comics and I haven’t looked back, so it’s quite surreal to actually be writing *Batman*!”

With Bruce Wayne having lost much of his fortune, his crime-fighting alter-ego is embroiled in the Penguin’s latest fiendish scheme, which involves targeting the uber-rich. “I’m a big fan of Bruce’s billionaire playboy persona, even though he’s now a millionaire playboy,” laughs Zdarsky. “And having it all tied up with the Penguin’s plan works with the story we’re telling, as, weirdly, Penguin sees things Bruce doesn’t thanks to his status.”

Zdarsky’s first issue also sees the debut of a formidable



new villain. “With Failsafe, I wanted to give Batman a massive physical threat that was also savvy and knows his moves,” explains Zdarsky, who is enjoying his partnership with artist Jorge Jiménez. “Really the impetus behind it was to get Jorge to design another character, since he’s so damn good at it!” he continues. “He really is the best. Everything he touches looks amazing, plus he brings such enthusiasm to the book that it infects me!”

“Before we started, I told him we were going to go darker with our version of Batman and I wondered if he wanted to adjust his style to match that, which he did and it’s glorious. Batman looks so damn cool, and Failsafe just feels dangerous!”

Providing vital support for the Bat will be Tim Drake’s Robin, who was recently confirmed as bisexual. “I’m having Batman retreat into darkness a bit, and Tim was so crucial when he was introduced

to bring Batman out of that,” reasons Zdarsky. “Also, Bruce seeing Tim come out and move towards a happy life has him re-thinking some of his own responsibilities towards his Bat-family.”

Zdarsky is also penning the Belen Ortega-drawn back-up featuring *Catwoman*, which interlinks with the core narrative. “Their relationship will weave through the whole run,” he teases. “I really wanted to use the back-ups to tie into the main stories, to continue plot elements from them, and I’m intending to write them all to make it feel really unified. Tini Howard is killing it over on *Catwoman* and we’re friends, so together we have some fun plans for Bruce and Selina!”

Currently also scripting *Daredevil* for the House of Ideas, Zdarsky is enjoying the contrast between Batman’s completely fictional hometown and the Man Without Fear’s equally gritty Hell’s Kitchen environs. “I’ve spent so long in Marvel’s New York City that it’s almost liberating to be in a thoroughly made-up iconic location like Gotham.” **BJ**

Batman issue 125 is out now.



NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

Kit Harrington’s Jon Snow will return in HBO

Game Of Thrones sequel

Neil Patrick Harris on villain duty for **Doctor Who** S21a

Marvel developing

Wonder Man

series from Shang-Chi’s Destin Daniel Cretton and Community’s Andrew Guest

Jude Law leading **Star Wars: Skeleton Crew** for Disney+

Squid Game season two confirmed along with spin-off reality show

Anthony Hopkins voicing a battle robot in Zack Snyder’s **5P epic Rebel Moon**

Three **Avatar: The Last Airbender** animated films on their way

Uma Thurman joining sequel to **The Old Guard** at Netflix

The Boys renewed for a fourth season

Good Girls’ Manny Montana to be series regular in **Murder’s Ironheart**

Will Arnett voicing Sweet Tooth in **Twisted Metal** TV adapt

Osamu Tezuka’s **Astroboy** set for 3D CG animation reboot

Raised By Wolves ending after two seasons

Snowpiercer axed after four



SCI-FACT! There’s also a new creative team on *Detective Comics* this month, with scripter Ram V joining artist Rafael

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

New York Stories

A Northern vampire travels to the Big Apple in new Radio 4 horror **English Rose**



"LET THE RIGHT One In meets *Girls*" - that's how the BBC

is hyping its new BBC Sounds drama *English Rose*, a sizzingly contemporary and often brutal horror story set in New York City, from the pen of novelist and playwright Helen Cross. Cross herself, however, simply calls the five-parter "a feminist vampire story". It's certainly a bracingly different take on a genre that's been bent into many different shapes over the years.

Perhaps horror's first post-#MeToo vampire tale, *English Rose* follows a bloodsucker named Rose from her home in Whitby to New York as she takes on the job of babysitter to the mysterious Gulliver for his secretive, enigmatic parents, wealthy artist Austin and actress Maya.

"I had Rose come from Whitby as a nod to *Dracula*," Cross tells us from her home in East Yorkshire. "I had this idea that Rose and her clan were probably there before *Dracula*, and when Bram Stoker went to visit Whitby in the late 19th century, maybe Rose's family were already there and maybe her mum and sisters were vampires he encountered."

While Whitby is a kind of Mecca for literary vampire nuts, it's actually local for Cross. "I go there a lot," she says. "I'm just along the coast from Whitby, and it does have a sort of eerie supernatural power."

English Rose, she explains, was conceived during the first lockdown, a time when "the world didn't make sense any more." Most of Cross's stories



Alexandra Mardell plays the titular Rose.

before this have been solidly realistic, with barely a hint of the supernatural, but the uncanniness of those lockdowns inspired her to pen something more fantastical.

"It's about a girl who is finding herself as a vampire," she reveals.

"Over hundreds of years they've tried to live a kind of vegan vampire diet"

"Rose has been brought up in Whitby by her mum, who wants to keep her and her little clan safe, so over hundreds of years they've tried to live a kind of vegan vampire diet. They've tried to eat little animals and rodents, and they've tried not to cause havoc or destruction.

"But that's taken its toll on Rose, and so the story is about reaching your fullest potential. What Rose has to do in the story is take charge of her sexuality; she needs to fight back against sexism and she needs to address negative attitudes towards women."



Prolific actor Demetri Goritsas also features.

Upon arriving in New York, Rose gives in to her hunger for human flesh, leading to some fairly gruesome slayings. Although *English Rose* is debuting all at once on BBC Sounds as a podcast box set, it's also being broadcast weekly on Radio 4, a station more used to plays about dysfunctional middle-class marriages and "everyday stories of country folk". So how much freedom did Cross have when it came to embracing the violence that's part of every vampire's life?

"I've gone as far as I wanted, and no one told me to stop," she laughs. "The great thing about radio is that none of it's dumped in front of your face as visuals. So your mind will take you as far as you want to go. So if your mind conjures up blood and gore and guts and spurring necks and fangs, that's your mind doing it a little bit more than mine!" **so**

English Rose is on BBC Sounds on 15 July, with the episodes going out weekly on Radio 4 from the same date.



SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Island, Getaway

The fifth and final season of **Jurassic World: Camp Cretaceous** concludes the campers' crazy adventures



→ WHEN WE LAST LEFT THE SIX SURVIVING campers from the *Jurassic World* implosion on Isla Nublar, in the season four finale of *Jurassic World: Camp Cretaceous*, they'd escaped to a nearby island that was revealed to be the secret, alternate dinosaur research enclave of Mantah Corp. Their BRAD program puts behaviour chips inside the dinosaurs' brains to control them, and Kenji's estranged dad Daniel Kon (Andrew Kishino) is behind it all.

It was a jaw-dropping moment that gets fleshed out in the fifth and final season of the animated series. The fates of the "Nublar Six" will play out, and get a resolution that executive producer and showrunner Scott Kreamer tells *Red Alert* they've been working towards from the start. "I knew ultimately where I wanted this series to go and had an idea of what makes sense to me," Kreamer explains. "Even in the early days, we had some general ideas about where we saw the last episodes going. That being said, a lot of the specifics of it came naturally. Like there was that natural break when we went from Isla Nublar to Mantah Corp Island, so definitely things shifted there. Characters changed, and other things changed. But ultimately, with the trajectory of these kids and the story we were telling, we were pretty true to the original concept."

The series has also developed alongside the *Jurassic World* film franchise, with the input of writer/director Colin Trevorrow, Kreamer reveals that Trevorrow was even in their writers' room during the scripting of *Jurassic World Dominion*. "I don't know how Colin was able to write and direct and produce and do his movie while making time

for us," Kreamer says with gratitude. "But he always gave his two cents, whether it was a little course correction, or a pitch, or just, 'I don't like that' or 'I love this!'"

And there might even be more concrete connections to the films in the last season. "Everything with this show starts ostensibly with these six characters, but we do love the Easter eggs," Kreamer enthuses. "We do love intertwining with the movie canon. There's some confrontations towards the end of the season that I'm hoping fans will appreciate. It's something that we were certainly excited about doing."

With regards to the high-tech turn the show has taken with the BRAD+ system that makes the Spinosaurus and Carnotaurus remote-controlled, Kreamer says they went back to *Jurassic Park* author Michael Crichton's explorations of future tech.

"Michael Crichton did *Westworld*," Kreamer reminds us. "The story was definitely a risk, but this felt like the natural way that the story was going. There's dinosaurs, and people are gonna use technology to turn a buck, or to their own gains. At its heart, it's a sci-fi concept. It just started leaning more into the 'sci' part of it as the series continues."

Asked if the finale is the end of the kids' stories, Kreamer says, "Never say never. But when we conceived of how the whole story would wrap up, it wasn't to potentially set up something down the line. This felt like the natural end and how we wanted to wrap up this story. We just really wanted to do justice by these characters." **TB**

Jurassic World: Camp Cretaceous is on Netflix from 21 July.



▶ **SCI-FACT!** Scott Kreamer admits they had to change some of their storylines because they accidentally stepped on events in the movies.

► **SCI-FACT!** The first Comic Rock was 1980's "Terror Tube". Inspired by The Jam's "Going Underground", it introduced Nemesis the Warlock.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Space Oddities

This Summer **2000 AD** will
Comic Rock you

➔ AFTER THARG'S disc-spinning in February's 45th anniversary issue, the *Galaxy's* Greatest Comic returns to a musical theme for this year's *Sci-Fi Special*, which recalls Prog 167's Comic Rock instalment.

"Music and 2000 AD have fed on each other over the last four decades, and this was a chance to do a bit more with the idea," says editor Matt Smith. "So I asked the writers to pick a song that they could fit a story around."

A long-time fan of the band Alphaville, Michael Carroll based his Judge Dredd face-off with a disillusioned fellow Judge around their "Ascension Day". "In the song, the storyteller has realised that the world is falling apart and has to choose whether to embrace the darkness or stand against it," he explains. "I decided to go for the flavour of the song, but there are still a few direct references in there."

"I have a killbot drone sailing through an empty construction site, and on the wall outside we see a sign: 'Ocean of Wonder Aquapark grand opening July 13th,'" continues artist Stewart Kenneth Moore, alluding to the lyrics' mention of "oceans of wonder". "Which is the day the *Sci-Fi Special* is on sale!"

Describing her as his "favourite recording artist," Paul Cornell tapped into

Kate Bush for his and Emma Vieceli's story of Judge Anderson venturing into the mind of a mysterious psychic perp.

"Suspended In Gaffa" is a track that means a lot to me," he says. "Given Anderson's genre, I thought the clash between the grit of Mega-City One and the wonder of Kate's imagination would make for great visuals, and Emma has proved me right."

Kek-W settled on Stealers Wheel's "Stuck In The Middle With You" as he and artist Steve Austin chronicle Judge Death's involvement in a Block War. "Once I had the song's title and lyrics in my mind, it quickly became apparent exactly who Judge Death would be 'stuck in the middle

with' and also what they would be stuck in the middle of," he laughs. "I wrote it with a deliberate retro feel, a story featuring a classic '80s version of Death that channels the vibe of the early Brian Bolland/Brett Evans Dark Judges stories when they were spooky/erotic/shadowy black and white presences, but with some of the bonkers-fun John Wagner and Alan Grant aspects of Mega-City One, too."

The Beatles' "Happiness Is A Warm Gun", meanwhile, was the perfect soundtrack for Sinister Dexter's encounter with an otherworldly weapon. "Sinister Dexter is about two Gun Sharks – hitmen

in the futuristic city of Downloade, who often show their fetishisation of guns and ammo," explains writer Dan Abnett, who is teaming up with artist Antonio Puso. "Happiness Is A Warm Gun" suggested a way of pushing that satire further, where the gun goes beyond mere fetishisation and becomes talismanic, as though possessed by an urge to kill."

Finally, Neil Young's "Rockin' In The Free World" was the choice of David Baillie, who is taking on Middenface McNulty with artist Vw Glass. "I went for it as I've loved it since I was a teenager," he says. "One line in particular fitted so perfectly with a moment near the finale that I couldn't resist!"

2000 AD Sci-Fi Special 2022 is out on 13 July.



► **SCI-FACT!** A design flaw in Cantwell's Death Star model inspired the creation of the trench run sequence.

NEW AUTHOR

MARY MCMYNE

MEET THE PROFESSOR
BEHIND RAPUNZEL RIFF
THE BOOK OF GOTHIEL



Tell us about your protagonist.

→ Hælewise, daughter-of-Hedde, is shunned by her village for her ability to sense the next world. Her only solace lies in the folktales her mother tells of child-stealing witches, wolf-princes, and a wise woman who lives in an ancient tower. When her mother dies, she flies to find the wise woman and uncover the truth behind those tales.

Does the book have any message?

→ It asks why stories are told the way they are, portraying women and other maligned characters sympathetically. It asks what medieval women persecuted for witchcraft were really doing, subverting patriarchal narratives.



How long did it take to write?

→ Eight years. The story remained largely unchanged, but the world-building, politics, and magic system became more complex with each draft.

How much research did you do?

→ I studied Middle High German and read medieval histories of magic and witchcraft, and travelled to the Black Forest to walk in Hælewise's footsteps. I visited the reliquary that contains Hildegard of Bingen's bones, and stumbled into the remains of her abbey beneath the streets of Bingen.

What are you working on next?

→ A magic-infused novel set in Elizabethan England, following another maligned woman from literature, Shakespeare's Dark Lady. ■

The Book Of Gothiel is out on 28 July, published by Orbit Books.

THE FINAL FRONTIER



COLIN CANTWELL 1932-2022

Visionary behind the iconography of *Star Wars*



From X-wing fighters to the Death Star, conceptual designer Colin Cantwell was one of the key talents who shaped the look of George Lucas's universe.

Born in San Francisco, the son of a commercial artist, Cantwell earned a bachelor's degree in applied arts from the University of California. After graduating he worked on promotional films for NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and provided special photographic effects for 1968's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He enjoyed a fruitful creative relationship with notoriously challenging director Stanley Kubrick: "It may have been difficult for others to work with his intensity but we understood each other and were very compatible," he recalled.

In 1973 Cantwell directed *Voyage To The Outer Planets*, a multimedia film for the Reuben H Fleet Science Center in San Diego. This brought him to the attention of George Lucas, who hired him to conceptualise the spaceship models in *Star Wars*. Following Lucas's brief – realism blended with "a comic book nobility" – Cantwell assembled prototypes out of available parts, from pill containers to repurposed pieces of commercially available model kits.

"You had to instantly know the bad guys from the good guys," he believed, "by how [a ship] looks and feels." While artists Ralph McQuarrie and Joe Johnston further refined the designs, it was Cantwell who established such instantly recognisable iconography as the TIE fighter, the Star Destroyer, the landspeeder and the Tantive IV – originally planned to be the Millennium Falcon.

Post-*Star Wars* credits included computer graphics for 1979's *Buck Rogers In The 25th Century* and the NORAD display in 1983's *WarGames*.

Once asked which of his ships he would love to fly, Cantwell had no hesitation: "It has to be the X-wing. As soon as I get strapped in, I am hitting that hyper-speed button." ■

JULEE CRUISE 1956-2022

Musician, singer and songwriter who collaborated with David Lynch on the *Twain Peaks* soundtrack.

TIM SALE 1956-2022

American comics artist known for *Batman: The Long Halloween* and *Superman For All Seasons*.

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PREY



DIRECTOR DAN
TRACHTENBERG
TAKES THE
PREDATOR
FRANCHISE
BACK TO
BASICS WITH
NEW MOVIE

PREY

WORDS: DARREN SCOTT

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L

L

Dane DiLiegro
as the
Predator. No
spoilers here!





HEN DIRECTOR Dan Trachtenberg takes time out to talk with *SFX* — wearing a Weyland-Yutani

Corp baseball cap, no less — he's in the final days of working on *Prey*, saying it's "the most intense it's ever been" as they complete sound and visual effects. It is, he says, "a very precarious tightrope we're walking." Gulp. If it doesn't make it to Disney+ on time, don't blame us.

Originally produced under the codename *Skulls* ("Always a cover-up," he says, "*Prey* was actually the first title that I pitched"), this fifth instalment in the "regular" *Predator* series was originally in early stages of production at the same time as 2018's *The Predator*.

The then 20th Century Fox saw *Prey* as an opportunity to mimic the *Star Wars* franchise, by having a "main trilogy and then there's these interesting side stories." Slightly sidelined by the Fox/Disney merger, this new take on *Predator* was influenced, he says, by minimal dialogue, action movies and survival stories — "a single character going through a gauntlet".

That character is Naru (Amber Midthunder), a highly skilled warrior who sets out to protect her people in the Comanche Nation — only she's never hunted something quite like this before. Naru and *Prey*, Trachtenberg says are "a lens-shift from the typical action hero that we see in this kind of movie. I started thinking about, 'Who is the person that's never the hero?'"

He thinks back to third grade and, not being allowed to see the original *Predator* in 1987, recalls some friends recounting the action to him. "They got to this part where they described Billy, the Native American scout, getting into a fight with a *Predator* on a bridge over a waterfall.

"Then I saw the movie eventually when I was old enough, and that part is not in the movie. The set-up is there, but the pay-off is not. So I always thought, well, what about that movie? That's what I want to see."

UNDER ATTACK

Prey is set 300 years in the past; fans may recall a pistol bequeathed to Danny Glover's Mike Harrigan in 1980's *Predator 2*, engraved with the year 1715.

"As I was thinking of the movie, the *Predator* thing trickled in for me and I thought of that gun. I was like, 'Oh yeah, this can work that they were here, that they came around this time.' So it certainly was an unlocking element for me for the story for sure."

From here, Trachtenberg knew the direction a new *Predator* movie had to go. "I always think the *Predator*, *Alien* and *Terminator* movies, despite having different directors,

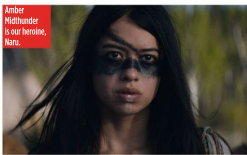
all feel like they're of their own little genre," he explains. "I think it's in large part, mainly thinking of *Aliens* over *Alien*, the action-horror mash-up, but with a real hankering for the military aspects feeling more authentic than not. There's always this authentic blend of where you're rooted in the real world, then the introduction of the sci-fi element, that McTiernan and Cameron were so deft at."

"I sort of wanted to take the same approach and be as authentic as we possibly could in a totally different way, in a more Terrence Malick way. In our movie, we put the cast through bootcamp to make sure that they could function as a unit. The Comanche were sort of the SEAL Team Six of the era, they were the most fierce warriors at the time. So they learned how to move through the forest as a unit and communicate with each other non-verbally."

"It was really an incredible experience and the culmination of their training was the one day [trainer] Kevin sat me down to have a conversation, with the training room behind. It had all these cardboard boxes set up as trees and targets. He was sitting having a conversation with me, and then all of a sudden, ➔

“The Comanche were sort of the SEAL Team Six of the era, the most fierce warriors”

Amber Midthunder is our heroine, Naru.



Ania, Rhee, Wasape, Taabe and Naru.

"It was extremely physical!"

Amber Midthunder
is **Naru**

What can you tell us about Naru?

🔥 She's a young woman, who is Comanche, living in 1719 and she wants to be a warrior. The Comanche people were really good warriors and a warrior society, and she wants to be a part of that. She's kind of told that her place is not there. Our movie does a great job of taking that and interweaving a really interesting narrative into a super fun, very action-y, very *Predator* movie that also has a substantial story. It's not just like, "Oh, I want to be a warrior." And the answer's no. It's, "Why? Why do you care about that?" It takes a look at why people want to do what they do, or what is underneath that. But in a way that is very fun, very entertaining, very action-packed.

What skills did you have to learn for *Prey*?

🔥 The Comanche language, which is not easy. I'm familiar with my Lakota language, and they are not at all the same. So learning and becoming familiar with the Comanche language was extremely challenging and very, very cool getting to learn it. It is a really hard language. There's a lot of vowels so your mouth is open for a long time and it's very specific. Then physically, we were in a four-week boot camp before we started shooting, where we were doing different skill sets. We learned archery, working with spears, general stunts and fight training. Working out physical activities because it was an extremely physical shoot. It was. Extremely physical.

How would you say your character compares with Arnold Schwarzenegger's?

🔥 I would love to see them fight. That would be so cool. I never thought about that until just now. Obviously I stand with my girl! But if I actually got to see Arnold Schwarzenegger in real life, or let alone have a fight scene with him, I would probably die. Just out of joy.

Tell us about the first time that you came face to face with a *Predator*...

It was so exciting. I don't know if I was supposed to see it right then. I was on set and saw a group of people in some bushes. In the trees, in the tall brush, I could just see this movement and texture. "What is that?" And this thing happened to my body and I immediately go, "I could take it." That was my response, "I can kill that!" That's absurd. Because it's huge, and very scary-looking. But I was like, "No, I got this." But it was also amazing. I just walked straight to it and just stared. I mean, it's a person inside the suit. But to me it was an "it" and I was just staring at it and amazed by it. Wanting to fight it and also just touch and poke it. There's a little kid part of me and then there was the Nanu part of me, and both were equally transfixed very differently.

What was the most memorable moment from filming?

Shooting the end of the film was kind of wild. We shot it for three days. We kept getting pieces of it at a certain time of night. It was just the bigness of it. And it was so early on in our shoot. It was in the second week or something. I think originally it had been like the first thing we were going to shoot, which is insane. That felt like such a big thing to do; doing that so early felt like one of the most ambitious undertakings.

What do you hope people take away from *Prey*?

I'm very excited to see what comes of this. I'm really proud of this movie. As a sci-fi movie, I think it really delivers on all the things that people want. I think the Predator is very cool. I think the action is very cool. I think the tone and the style of everything Dan did is amazing. But ultimately, the most important thing to me about this movie is that this film has the first indigenous female protagonist of an action movie, I believe ever.

So that's huge. That makes me emotional to think about every time I say it, because that's huge for me and for my people. For me to be able to represent that, I just want to do it well, and have it be something that we can all be proud of. Hopefully there's a lot more of that after this, because I think that it is an extremely untapped resource. All the things that people want, we can do, and then more.

the entire 'hunting party' leapt up and pointed their bows and arrows at me. Like, two feet away. They had moved from the back of the room to the front of the room without me seeing them. Then I saw a video of while we were having a conversation and saw them moving in coordination from 'tree to tree', and they had done it all silently and deftly. It was just incredible."

BACK TO BASICS

Originally established with 1987's *Predator*, the franchise – while beloved – has struggled to emulate its initial success. Trachtenberg agrees. "That was also a huge part of the conception. I felt like, this is the move that you make. Especially because the last one [*The Predator*] hadn't come out. At the time I had only read the script, and the script was incredible and did crazy things. Really, really bold choices that I thought were so cool.

"And I thought, 'Well, that's giant, what that's trying to do. And that's really expressing different newer concepts.' I thought, if it works, or if it doesn't, the move you make is you go back to basics. You strip it down to the core essence of what works in the franchise

“It's the smallest, slimmest, I think, of the Predators, though still a hulking alien”

and then iterate from there. So that definitely was the impulse of, how do we root it in the simplicity of the premise and of the first film, but try to deliver something that's entirely new at the same time. That's how we ended up with what we've got."

That's not to say that *Prey* doesn't build on what's gone before and offer a unique experience for viewers.

"How do we deliver the new? Give a creature that the audience, even major fans of the franchise, can discover along with our main character?" he asks. "Not that it's entirely different, it still has the same code. Which is a huge part of the theme of the movie.

"What was sort of in the DNA of the original movie is really brought to the surface here in terms of the Predator being here looking for the alpha – looking for who's on top and discovering for the first time what that is on this planet.

"I want to specifically say this, because I think there's been some confusion how people have understood: in my mind, this is not a prequel movie, this isn't. Let's tell the origin of the Predator. This is really something that's set prior to the original *Predator* movie. And the Predator creature in this one, this is its first time travelling to Earth.

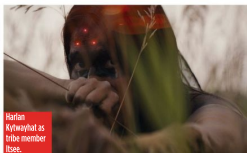
"Who's to say if any Predator at any point has ever been to Earth prior? But for us, this Predator is discovering this planet and looking for who was on top. We use that code to examine the larger themes of the movie."

Jumping to an earlier point in the evolution of the Predator allowed Trachtenberg to give this particular hunter a new look.

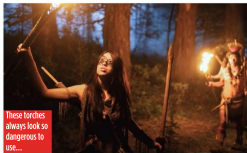
"The design for me, though incredible, functionally it's always been very top-heavy," he says. "The head has always been so large to accommodate a person inside, especially when it was developed in the '80s. This is now the most refined, most proportional head to body ratio that's ever been. We actually were able to get the silhouette to be a little bit more anatomically correct. Frankly, it's the smallest, slimmest, I think, of the Predators, though still a hulking alien creature."

Trachtenberg says that *Prey* "learns the lessons from this franchise and any science fiction movie prior" in terms of creature creation. "It's a blend of great practical effects – not just the Predator, but also other things we do in the movie – but the Predator as well, and in getting everything people want out of a 'man in suit' kind of thing. And all the benefits of that with, I hope, not all the curses, and using CG elements to do things that the suit can't do.

"So it's almost entirely a guy in a suit, but we've been able to find key ways to enhance it and hopefully trick the audience into feeling like, 'Oh man, this thing is a living, breathing creature.' There's a lot of play with weapons →



Harlan Kyrmayhal as tribe member Itsee.



These torches always look so dangerous to use.

we've seen in the other movies that are either in this one as well, or we have what could have been an earlier iteration of that weapon. Its mask is entirely new. Basically everything was, 'How do we make this thing feel much more creature-like, much more alien than it ever had before?'

"I think that while the design is totally iconic, I've always worried a little about the movement and feeling like there's a professional wrestler inside that suit. We got this great performer Dane DiLiegro and found a way to incorporate his movements to make this creature feel much more feral, much more primal – but still bipedal and intelligent.

"Its movement and the way it uses its weapons is far more ferocious and scary in this movie. And far more agile than we've seen it before."

How did that finally translate for the director when he came face-to-face with his alien lead? "Honestly, it was scary. It was really weird," he says, despite being across all stages of its creation.

"It was getting dark outside and we were shooting in the woods and there was just a primal little kid inside me that was like, 'Oh! I closed my eyes, they walked me over and I opened them and he was in character, in my face and really tall and terrifying. Truly terrifying. So yeah, it was pretty great!'"

PIRATING PREDATOR

With the news that a new *Alien* series is in the works, does this mean that we can look forward to further chapters in the *Predator* universe?

"This certainly opens the door to so many avenues as to what you can do next. Now, it's definitely too early to say what any plans could be. But there's definitely..." He pauses. "The conversations that have been had about it are pretty exciting. I can say that."

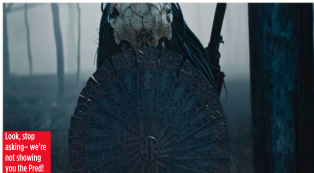
What then, if there were no limits, would he like to do with the *Predator* franchise? He chuckles. "Yeah, that I definitely can't say!"

Previously, Trachtenberg has been linked to a series based on Kevin Costner's *Waterworld* movie. That's despite his problems with motion sickness... "It's so early days on that, who even knows," he considers. "Although I think with the developments in LED wall technology it might be possible to make a movie that's water-bound while not being on the water."

Saying that he's always loved pirates and has long wanted to make a "high seafaring adventure tale," he notes that, thanks to technology, "now there's a path to me making a pirate movie someday." A *Predator* pirate movie, perhaps?



Naru and her very good boy (or girl) get mighty.



Look, stop asking – we're not showing you the Predator!



It's the obligatory stealth mission.

"It's interesting. It's very interesting," he considers. "There's certainly precedent for that in the comics..."

When asked to consider a stand-out moment from production on *Prey*, Trachtenberg has nothing but the highest praise for his leading lady, Amber Heard, herself a member of the Fort Peck Sioux Tribe.

"There's a number of moments where you watch her and say, 'Oh, she's not pretending, she's really going through a thing here.' Visceral, visceral moments that were really incredible, were truly special.

"What crept up on me, that I did not realize was happening – I was so focused on it being

the survivor story, but because of the setting and as things evolved, I did not realize we were really making an adventure movie. There's so many moments where Amber is sliding around, great moments of swashbuckle, that feel like the movies that I grew up watching.

"It's so epic, and I just can't believe that I'm making this. This is crazy. I cannot believe I'm making this kind of movie. It's really, really grand and swashbuckling, which I love. So I'm excited. I'm really excited. I don't know that people quite know what to expect from it yet..." ●

Prey is on Disney+ from 5 August.



"Women are ready to see a woman lead into action"

Producer Jhane Myers on why *Prey* is groundbreaking

A producer with unique skill sets

▲ I'm Native verbal and Native American. I'm Comanche and Blackfeet, I'm enrolled in the Comanche Nation. So this is really important for me, because language has always been one of my passions and native language, it's really important. The fact that people will get to watch this film — not just Comanche people, all Native people, people everywhere — in Comanche, is super exciting for me.

Enhancing the production

▲ They were like, "Look at this and see if we should change anything." I didn't really think that we should change a lot of stuff, but I added a lot of the things that happened with Comanche people, or that happened with Native people. I was able to add those firsthand things that they probably never thought of, which was great.

The time is now

▲ Having Amber as a lead and as a hero — this is the perfect time for a hero. Women are ready to see a woman lead into action. If you think about all the top action movies, the ones that did the best did have a woman as a lead.

A hands-on producer

▲ I've had a varied career. I'm also a fine artist making traditional Native attire, and that historical aspect for accuracy was really important. It was really great because we had a great costumer in Stephanie Portor, who was just like a sponge and just wanted to learn everything.

Why *Prey* is making a difference

▲ It's groundbreaking in many ways. For one we have a native female lead, and she's an enrolled member of the Fort Peck reservation. When you have somebody that's a Native producer in that area, then they can ensure that more Native people get hired. We had about 75 people that were hired through this production that were Native, not only in the background — we had Native people in every single department.

For Comanche, this is the first time from my tribe that we have a whole club and subtitles in our language. That's the first time ever. I think that sets a really important part in the paradigm. Because if you're going to borrow from our culture, and our culture is so crucial for your story, I think it's really important to be able to repay that by paying homage to

the language and actually using the tribal language.

Why sci-fi terms weren't difficult to translate

▲ Every tribe has monster stories. For Comanches, it's called Pia Mupitsi [Big Cannibal Owl]. It's this big tall creature that kills people. It's the scary story that you tell children if you want them to behave before the Mupitsi is gonna come and get you. So the fact that we could use Mupitsi in this film, it's amazing.

Her most memorable moment on set

▲ There's a scene where a woman is riding on a horse. And they're like, "We don't have anybody to ride and we need a woman, what are we going to do?" I was just sitting there and I'm like, "I'll do it." I put on the dress and everything. For me that's memorable, because my future grandchildren, my future great grandchildren, can go back someday and watch this movie and be like, "That's our grandmother in this film!"

It just shows, like our Comanche culture, we're always ready, we have these skills, and when they need to be used, we just use them. So for me that was the most memorable moment.

A full-page background image of She-Hulk (Jennifer Walters) in a dark, high-tech laboratory. She is standing in profile, facing right, wearing a grey hoodie and blue shorts. Her right arm is extended towards a piece of equipment. In the background, there are various pieces of scientific equipment, including a monitor on the left showing a glowing blue image of a human head, and a device on the right with two small screens displaying blue-tinted data. The lighting is dim, with blue highlights from the screens and equipment.

MARVEL
DEPLOYS THE
STRONG ARM
OF THE LAW IN
THE NEW
LIVE-ACTION
SHE-HULK
SERIES

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

MCU IN



COURT

You'd probably be quite cross, too.

OVER

THE LAST TWO years, Marvel Studios has been refashioning familiar TV formats and tropes by bending them into something new for its various Disney+ streaming series. Golden age TV, two-handers and coming-of-age stories have all been tackled, and now with *She-Hulk: Attorney At Law*, the procedural/workplace sitcom gets the Marvel treatment.

Orphan Black star Tatiana Maslany plays attorney Jessica Walters, who handles superhuman cases at her law firm, and just happens to be the cousin of Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo). In both the comics and the series, Walters gets a blood transfusion from Bruce and develops a more controllable subset of his Hulk powers which she has to integrate into her everyday existence.

GREEN ROOTS

The character dates back to 1980, when she made her first appearance in *The Savage She-Hulk*, written by the one and only Stan Lee and drawn by John Buscema. It was that introduction that first grabbed the eye of young Jessica Gao, who would grow up to not only adore the character, but become a TV writer for shows like *Robot Chicken* and *Silicon Valley*.

Finding herself at Marvel Studios three different times to pitch for various projects,

Jen, Nikki and Pug doing what lawyers do best.

it became Gao's habit to close meetings with executive producers such as Brad Winderbaum by saying: "If you ever do a She-Hulk movie, you better call me because if you don't, I will burn this building to the ground."

"I said that every single time I didn't get [the job]," Gao tells *SFX*, with a laugh. "The first time I ever pitched at Marvel, I even put She-Hulk in my pitch. And Brad said then, 'You are the first person in this building to bring up

She-Hulk.' What's funny is when I went in to actually pitch *She-Hulk*, Kevin Feige came in the room and was like, 'Okay, we called you. You can't burn us to the ground.'"

Gao says with pride that audiences will see fundamentally the same series she got to pitch on that fateful day. Framing the series as a half-hour comedy, *She-Hulk: Attorney At Law* takes a "high-concept, extraordinary idea" and grounds it in the minutiae of Walters's





Jen suffers from a minor wardrobe malfunction.



Jen begins to change in *She-Hulk's* first trailer.



who suddenly becomes a superhero through no fault (or intention) of her own. "How would a normal person respond emotionally and mentally, if all of this stuff were thrown onto her? I know that I would be a) furious and b) exhausted," Gao says.

"I really wanted her to have a well-rounded life. I didn't want to just have a show that was talking about superhero stuff only. She's a person first and then she had superpowers dumped on top of her. But there's still a person

“One of my favourite things about the character and comics is how self-aware she is”

under there who still has to live a life. Really, that is the crux of the show: this person that's underneath all of that.”

Gao says that readers of the comics will see in the series elements from all of the big *She-Hulk* comics runs, including Stan Lee's, John Byrne's, Dan Slott's and Charles Soule's. "I loved all of them, but I really just went through and cherry-picked a character here, a villain there, and a storyline here," she explains. "We just went through and kind of fused it all together so that it really felt simultaneously like a culmination, but also completely its own thing."

The scripts also incorporate the tone and outside-the-box voice used in so many of the comic runs. "One of my favourite things about the character and comics is how self-aware she is, how meta it goes and how it plays with comic book tropes," Gao teases. "That stuff was always very important to me from the beginning. There was no version [of the show] where we wouldn't be self-aware."

The task of portraying both normie Jennifer and She-Hulk fell on the talented but petite shoulders of Tatiana Maslany. Gao says that the actress was game right from the start, and threw herself into the learning curve of playing the Hulk side of the character in a mo-cap suit.

"It was just so demanding and so difficult and she really came through," Gao praises. "Watching her work is just awe-inspiring. She had to really infuse this character with humanity and make her seem like a real person that you cared about, that you really related to, and even if you didn't relate to her, you cared for her. And she had to do all that while wearing mo-cap with a camera in front of her face the entire time, and sometimes walking on ramps."

GREEN DAY

Helping Maslany through that process during production was executive producer/director Kat Coiro. She tells *SFX* that they spent the bulk of their time making sure Walters was always grounded, even when she shifts into her Hulk persona.

"She's this highly educated woman whose life gets completely thrown off track. She is now what many of us would think of as gifted with these attributes that we always think we want to be incredibly strong, to be incredibly gorgeous and an idealised version of yourself, and to be able to punch down a man in a dark alley [if he looks at you sideways]," she chuckles.

"But with those gifts, there's also a curse. It's also really hard, and you have to face yourself and look at the idea of imposter syndrome. 'Do I deserve all this attention? And is this attention even what I want?'"

During the production phase, Coiro says there was a lot of calibration and experimentation with tone. "It's really threading a fine line between situational comedy – and there is a sitcom element as a lot of the writers come from the sitcom world – but still existing within the MCU," he explains. "That was always the challenge. Even Kevin [Feige] has described it as a half-hour legal show, so there's a little bit of *Ally McBeal* in there. But you also still have to feel like you're within this universe."

Gao says that including Walters' family in the ensemble helped keep the story intimate and centred on her life. "What is the family dynamic when you have a Hulk, and when you have a second Hulk in the family?" Gao asks. ➔

everyday life. "That to me is always funny," Gao enthuses. "Because when you look at MCU movies, it's always huge scale, huge action and the fate of the universe is at stake every single time. But what I wanted to do was turn the camera over just a little bit to the right, and see what's going on there in that little slice of life."

Especially in regards to seeing Walters as a real, normal, working woman in her thirties

GREEN QUEEN

Tatiana Maslany is Jennifer Walters

Before *She-Hulk*, had you auditioned for Marvel Studios before?

■ This audition was the first real [one], and it was done over Zoom so I don't even know, really, who all was present. But I met Kevin [Feige] after I was cast and was able to sit down and chat with him.

You've chosen to do more character-centric projects previously. Did you have any reservations about joining the MCU?

■ I've always sort of been nervous to step into a world like this because I prize character over everything, and I just didn't know how much that would exist in the bigger projects. But when I read the pilot, this was such an unexpected take on a superhero story.

It's so human. There's really great explorations of the mundanity of life, in really great ways. And also, it's speaking to something that I'm really interested in, which is when you suddenly start getting seen as something; then you're seen as one thing, and you become commodified as that thing. What this show does, but in a funny and unexpected way, is deal with this idea.

How do you own the wholeness of what your body is when something has happened to you; or you are suddenly seen so differently; or there's an expectation on you to behave a certain way because of how you look? There's all these undertones that I find really compelling in the subtext of this sort of story. Also, what is the expectation on a female superhero versus a male superhero? It's incredibly different.

Did Kevin Feige do or say anything to assuage your nerves?

■ The fact that he got Jessica Gao to write the script; that her pitch was the one that grabbed him. It's so irreverent, and it's so risky and fun and funny. I think that was a really big indicator to me. But also, when you talk to Kevin, he's just like a big nerd. He loves movies, and is excited by storytelling and is really curious to try things out.



“There’s all these undertones that I find really compelling in the subtext”

Was there anything in particular that helped you prepare for taking on the role?

There's a few things. Definitely the comics. I read all of the *She-Hulk* iterations, which is really fun because you get to see her explore and change with different artists. And I got to do this tour of the props house. I got all of the stories of building these [props], and seeing how much care goes into conceptualising them, and how they're actual physical things that exist in space, that now are in this big warehouse. Stuff like that really helped me find my footing inside of the world.

Mark Ruffalo has been part of the MCU since *The Avengers*. Was he able to impart any wisdom on how to become comfortable in this storytelling world?

There's something about Mark that's just so open. When you've worked in this industry for long enough, it can be, probably, quite easy to be closed and to distrust and to not play because you get known for one thing, and so then you have to uphold some kind of legacy of work.

But with Mark, you're meeting somebody who will just spill it all and give it. And much of the dynamic is [Bruce] talking about being the Hulk and Jen sort of taking what I want and what I don't want. It hilariously mirrored what we were doing off-camera as well.

The show has a great ensemble cast. Is there a particular character who helps define Jen?

Ginger Gonzaga, who plays Nikki, has the fastest brain of anybody I've ever met. I got to learn a lot about comedy from her, and finding the rhythm. The first day was basically all scenes between the two of us, so it was establishing this very real, grounded dynamic of best friends. Like, who is Jen when she's just Jen? Nikki is very much attached to that identity. To get to explore that on day one was such a joy.

Did anything physical help you define Jen?

Weirdly, it was the hair for me. Her hair when she becomes *She-Hulk* is this gorgeous blow-out. So there was something about having Jen's hair be this curly mess that felt very antithetical to not only her job, which is very done-up, but also just the expectation of being this glorious, beautiful, 6' 7" woman. Mark actually coined the nickname Fuzzball, which is Jen to me.



Jameela Jamil is Nikki, *She-Hulk's* nemesis. Ooh.

With the inclusion of Mark Ruffalo as Bruce Banner, taking on the role of Jessica's mentor in all things to do with living with gamma radiation, the series gets the benefit of Banner's experience but contained within a personal story. Gao says she knew she was being ambitious in having Banner as part of her original pitch, along with Emil Blonsky (Tim Roth), but just put it out there in case it could be done. "I just hoped that [Marvel Studios] was going to do the other stuff and help me make it happen," she says. And they did.

Coiro says that getting to watch Maslany and Ruffalo meet and find their rhythm together was a highlight of production. "They came together and they just brought out the best in each other," she observes. "And I think most importantly, they had fun. And especially when you're doing comic book projects, you want to be having fun."

GREENSCREEN

Less fun, but a standard part of the process, was figuring out the right balance of CG and practical techniques to credibly bring *She-Hulk* to life. Coiro says they spent months on the design before going into production, then refined it during the post-production process. "It really is taking the design and asking, 'Are we getting those facial expressions and those nuances of reaction?'" she explains. "That is where all the time comes into play, just really honing in."

She's aware that fan reaction to the first trailer revealing the CG was mixed, but says that they expected it. "I think a lot of the reactions have to do with the fact that she is so different than anything we've seen," Coiro says. "When you think of Thanos or Hulk, they have a grisliness and a harshness and a bulkiness to them that is just so different. And when you just see a little pop of her, it's almost shocking because we haven't seen it before."

Coiro says she's worked closely with Victoria Alonso, the President of Physical, Post Production, VFX and Animation at Marvel Studios throughout the post process to finesse the *She-Hulk* look. "She has such an incredible



Mark Ruffalo returns as Dr. Jade Jaws himself.

eye, and to me a lot of that eye comes from this very emotional gut reaction that she has, which is backed by decades of technical expertise," she explains. "What I think is so cool is she keeps this real emotional reaction to the VFX. Watching her work has taught me so much about why something works and why it doesn't: why does it go into uncanny valley? And it always comes back to the actor's performance and capturing that."

As to enemies, there's the question of whom or what *She-Hulk* is coming up against in her new normal of being a reluctant Hulk. Gao says that they really wrestled, in the writers' room, with the concept of an adversary for Walters. "This was our chance to do something very different, and show that there are different types of villains," she teases. "There are different ways that they can affect you, and personal stakes are just as important as world-ending stakes to the person involved."

She says personalising it was key, and making use of the time that TV affords in showing long-term repercussions. "It doesn't have to be 'save the universe right now or everything explodes.' It can be this thing is not going away unless you deal with it."

And that all leads to a season-ending finale that Gao is giddily excited for audiences to see. "The finale is something that I did not think that we would be able to do..." she says conspiratorially, but happily. ●

She-Hulk: Attorney At Law is on Disney+ from 17 August.

A man with short dark hair and a beard is sitting on a dark horse. He is wearing a bright orange hoodie and blue jeans. He is looking off to the right. The background is a house with a porch and a railing. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The word "WAY" is written in large white letters at the top, and "WEST" is written in large white letters at the bottom. The word "NOPE" is written in small white letters in the top left corner. The page number "36" and the text "SFX MAGAZINE | AUGUST 2022" are in the bottom left corner.

NOPE

WAY

WEST

OUT

WATCH THE SKIES!
HORROR MASTER
JORDAN PEELE RETURNS
WITH "THE GREAT
AMERICAN UFO FILM"

NOPE

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

S

FX FINDS ITSELF confronted by two Jordan Peeles. They are absolutely identical, from the striking two-tone jackets both men are wearing to their

matching silver beards. As they speak, their words emerge in perfect sync even as their facial expressions mirror one another precisely. The original sits top left on our laptop screen while the clone – or could that be the original? – hovers bottom right. We do our best to ignore the presence of this uncanny twin but we can't resist the occasional peek, just in case we catch him in an unguarded moment with murder in his eyes.

Sure, it's only a glitch in a Zoom call, doubling up on one of the boxes. But given the sinister doppelgängers in *Us*, Peele's last slice of chill-inducing, politically conscious horror, it feels deeply on brand.

Peele's here in duplicate to promote his latest, *Nope*. Nope? Yup. "The story behind that title is a little similar to the title of *Get Out*," says the writer-director, referencing the 2017 smash that established him as a master of elevated scares. "I wanted to acknowledge my audience's perspective. In African-American culture there is an innate understanding of what 'nope' means. It means that we will not step into a haunted house. We will not do a lot of things we see in horror movies. So with this being the great American UFO film, I wanted to once again acknowledge that there is another 'nope' situation for us."

MAGIC SPECTACLES

The truth is out there, though given this is a Jordan Peele joint the finer details of that truth require Majestic 12-level clearance. Here's what we've gleaned from the redacted files: set in an isolated Californian town, *Nope* centres on ranch-owning siblings OJ and Emerald Haywood, played by Daniel Kaluuya – and Keke Palmer.

The Haywoods experience a series of unsettling close encounters, from glimpses of speeding shapes in the desert sky to more immediate confrontations with what appears to be irrefutable proof of extraterrestrial life. "What's a bad miracle?" asks a shaken OJ, trying to process these phenomena. "They got a word for that?"

For Peele the keyword was spectacle. Make no mistake – this is a movie movie, consciously engineered for the big screen. "I started this film in a time when I thought the theatrical



Kaluuya, Palmer and Brandon Perea as Angel Torres.



Daniel Kaluuya and Jordan Peele share a funny.

experience was in jeopardy," he tells *SFX*.

"So I wanted to save my magic place.

I wanted to make something that when the world returned to some kind of normalcy – not that that's what we can call this – and the theatres came back, that this would be something that would bring people out and would validate the theatrical experience.

"That's why I went big. I said, 'Look, I have a responsibility here. There are few people who can get a studio behind them to tell a story, to tell a really big, ambitious vision.' Every story is as big as it relates to the person who's watching it but the word spectacle itself is the first cornerstone of how I started thinking about the theme of the movie."

As you might expect from Peele, this is all a great deal more complicated than standard Hollywood tub-thumping about the immortal power of the theatrical experience. "I like to pinpoint what I think of as a human flaw," he

explains, "an innate sin in our DNA that I'm victim to as much as anyone else, something that I notice and that maybe I don't see anyone putting their finger on in the way I do. So with this first notion that the only way to get people out is to give them a spectacle, from that point forward I started to ask myself, 'Well, what's wrong with that?'"

"I started thinking about spectacle and I started thinking

about the insatiable human addiction to spectacle and where we are now. And that there is, in fact, a problem with the fact that traffic will slow down when there's an accident nearby, not because people are trying to help the person but because everyone has to get their little look, and what happens is traffic slows down and that person isn't helped.

"So there was a connection between that innate, unconscious human flaw and this thing that I'm saying, that in this world, where we have so many problems, I have to offer a spectacle of escapism. And so the film both embraces and condemns the very industry of the spectacle."

Peele grins, aware that he's gunning for nothing less than cinema itself. "It's a love letter and a 'fuck you' to my own industry at the same time! I'm taking on the society and the industry of the spectacle. I'm taking on the media and I'm taking on all the ways the

"THERE'S SOMETHING OUT THERE, ABSOLUTELY!"

Keke Palmer is Emerald Haywood

Where do you stand on UFOs? Do you believe there's genuinely something out there?

■ One thousand percent! Is that a real question, sir? [Laughs] One thousand percent I think there's something out there, absolutely, without a doubt!

How do the Haywoods react to the phenomena that they see in *Nope*? Curiosity? Scepticism? Or just plain old-fashioned terror?

■ All of it. And one that you didn't mention: wonder. Wonder and amazement is the best aspect of it, like it is to all of us humans, just like it is to a fly when the fly sees a light. The fly feels terror, because

its like, "This could burn my ass up," but it's also like, "Him, what is this thing?" So there's the balance of how our characters are experiencing their amazement within all of their terror and curiosity.

Jordan Peele's films are known for strong social commentary alongside the entertainment.

What do you think will resonate for audiences here?

■ Jordan's films are like art pieces. So it's like looking at the Mona Lisa's smile. You're going to see something totally different than I'm going to see. And that's what makes it work. We're in the

Peele-ian area where his work doesn't have to mean one thing to everybody and that's what makes it fantastic, because he fits in so many moments of social commentary and different aspects. When you watch it the first time you catch this, when you watch it the second time you catch that, on the third time you catch something else.

What I take from it is that what matters the most are the things that slip away when you aren't looking. That's what I see. I'll be very interested to see how other people see this film, and how it represents their relationship with spectacle.

“You're going to see something totally different than I'm going to see”

That paintwork could do with a refresh.



"EXPLOITATION'S A BIG THEME IN THIS"

Daniel Kaluuya Is OJ Haywood

Is this a bigger, more ambitious story than *Get Out*?

■ In terms of scale, but I feel the story we told in *Get Out* was ambitious in itself. Jordan is always trying to articulate an experience that hasn't been visualised, so for me it was just a bigger playpen. In that sense it was "How does he express his truth with all this new equipment that he has?"

You shot this in the desert. What does that landscape particularly bring to this story?

■ For me it was just the scale. You put the camera in front of it and

it's a film in itself, with the hills and the mountaintops. It's just a beautiful location. It really helped me see how the space made OJ. It's a different pace of life than you usually see in a film with someone of this age - usually it's a bit more busy. And that's very reflective of the environment that he's always in. And it was hot as fuck!

What themes do you think will resonate for audiences?

■ I can't even say much, bro! Anything I say will leak it! The only thing I think I can say without leaking anything is exploitation. Exploitation's a big theme in this:

exploiting a natural occurrence or something that's there. How people exploit it and make the most out of it is interesting.

Where do you stand on UFOs?

Do you believe there's genuinely something out there?

■ I don't know. Statistically it would make sense - I don't think we're the only lifeform in this universe. There's a lot of planets and a lot of stars. So when I look at it statistically and I get away from the human being God complex I would think that there would be more people. There must be other things!

“Jordan is always trying to articulate an experience that hasn't been visualised”

Hang on, is that an alien? Ah no, it's just a horse. Oops.



Keke Palmer
as Emerald
Haywood:
crying wolf?

toxicity of attention has affected us and brought us to where we are. We've all been gaslit to the point where we can get up early in the morning, pick up our phones, see one of the worst videos of violence or hate we've ever seen in our lives and then have to go about our day and eat our breakfast cereal and do the same thing the next day.

"We are obsessed with spectacle to the point that we are distracted by it from the real things that are happening in this world. This is what I was going through when I was writing the film, so what we have here is a film that feels something of a horror epic but is also a bit of an adventure as well."

And it's a movie that's very much in conversation with classics of the genre, including such UFOlogical touchstones as *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, *Signs* and *The Day The Earth Stood Still*.

"I love those movies," enthuses Peele. "I love UFO films. I've always thought they were extremely difficult [to make], and difficult for a studio to commit to. So that was part of the ambition, making a film that could add to that pantheon and sub-genre. And to specifically say, if an audience feels like they are in the presence of a UFO, then that's an undeniable experience."

"It's one that people are going to have to go and experience. It's a big film, it's a big cousin to those other films. Specifically I'm taking on 'Why haven't I seen the UFO film done to scare me?' There are some great ones – *Fire In The Sky* is a real classic – but as far as a big UFO horror film, there's not a ton to point to."

Crucial to *Nope*'s sense of widescreen spectacle – and echoing air of menace and paranoia – is its backdrop, the sun-beaten



Steven Yuan
plays rodeo
cowboy Ricky
Park.

peaks and desolate, saucer-haunted spaces of the Californian desert.

"The set for this film, in this little basin valley, is one of the biggest sets I've ever seen in a film," says Peele, who shot in Santa Clarita. "We got to own this stretch of valley where our Haywood Ranch is located. It's beautiful terrain, and at the same time there's something alarming and isolating about being out there in all that sky, in all that desert."

"It's a very unique film location for me, and not an area where I usually spend a lot of time. But it's also a love letter to nature itself, and that kind of big spectacle. After being holed up in 2020 I just wanted to be outside! And I thought everyone else might, as well. That's part of what the massive set brings us."

Peele also used Imax cameras to service that sense of spectacle. "The Imax experience is the pinnacle of immersiveness," he tells *SFX*. "I worked with Hoyte van Hoytema, who's a legendary cinematographer – I say legendary, but he's my age, so we're not very old! I said to him, 'Look, if I came to you and I said we need to get a video of a UFO, and that UFO footage needs to be the best footage that we've ever seen of any of these UFO sightings – it has to be the quintessential one – what would you use?'"

"He said, 'I would actually use an Imax camera, because it's the best image. It's the

biggest image and therefore the best. It has the most clarity.' So right there I was like, 'Great!' And then he took me to watch *Tenet* on Imax, and it blew me away, his work and how they used Imax in that film was just fantastic. So I'm a big fan, and there's no more spectacular way to watch this movie than in Imax."

The tantalising promo imagery for *Nope* feels hotwired into the unconscious. The teaser poster found an ominous, rain-dark cloud trailing bunting as it loomed over the lights of a desert town. Another, equally memorable poster saw a stallion swept into the night sky in a surreal vortex of sunglasses, Slurpee cups and blank-faced alien plushies. Peele's films lean

into this sense of fever dream. Think of Daniel Kaluuya's huge, tear-stained eyes as his mind plummets into the *Sunken Place* in *Get Out*; the scarecrow-like figure with the bloodied hand standing on the beach in *Us*.

Do the images shape the story or does the story trigger the images? Is Peele's writing process essentially a fight between dream logic and story logic? "You really are pinpointing a bit of my process," he admits. "It's very intertwined with imagery and I often do feel like the subconscious implications of visuals and shapes and colours can speak volumes that words of dialogue don't. I do

like imagery to be leading as much as dialogue, as much as story."

BRAND A PEELE

As the marketing tells us, *Nope* is "From the mind of Jordan Peele". He's a brand now, heir to M Night Shyamalan and Rod Serling as king of the twist-loaded chiller. Peele even fronted the recent revival of *The Twilight Zone*, taking Serling's place as black-suited guardian of that "land of both shadow and substance". So how does it feel to be a brand, with all the expectations that come with it?

"It's good," he declares, clearly happy with his place in the genre firmament. "Obviously you have to reconcile the fact that some sort of understanding of what I do and what I bring is why I am able to do more. There is an understanding and an expectation there. And at the same time, and another reason that I embrace a bit of expectation, is that I like to be able to break expectation. So there's always going to be some expectation, and whatever it is I'm hopefully going to use that in my story, and subvert it somehow."

In the corner of the screen Peele's inescapable doppelgänger agrees with every word. ●

Nope is in cinemas from 12 August.



On Dreams

THE SANDMAN

ON TV? SOMETIMES

DREAMS DO COME

TRUE... EXECUTIVE

PRODUCER DAVID S

GOYER EXPLAINS

HOW HE HELPED

BRING NEIL

GAIMAN'S

MASTERPIECE

TO LIFE

WORDS: WILL SALMON

THE SANDMAN IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ADAPT."

That's long been the received wisdom on Neil Gaiman's legendary comic book. Of course, we live in an age where seemingly impossible-to-adapt works are, in fact, being faithfully adapted with some regularity. Zack Snyder made his by-the-book version of *Watchmen* in 2009. Ben Wheatley delivered a pretty accurate take on JG Ballard's *High-Rise* in 2015. And last year Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* was released to massive acclaim and enough box office receipts to satisfy Baron Vladimir Harkonnen himself.

Still, none of those were *The Sandman*. Created by Gaiman along with artists Sam Kieth and Mike Dringunberg, the DC Comics series wove mythology, religion, folklore, urban legends and pulp horror into a single grand tapestry. Over 75 issues between 1989 and 1996 it told the story of Dream of the Endless, an immortal being who rules over the world of the unconscious. When a group of occultists try to imprison his sister Death on Earth, they capture him instead and hold him prisoner for decades. He eventually escapes but the consequences of his protracted absence from the Dreaming are vast. Part ongoing narrative, part anthology, *The Sandman* is less a single

story, more an exploration of the nature of storytelling itself.

Many have tried to adapt the series but all have failed—until now. "I feel like I've fallen into a niche where a lot of what I do now is adapting things that are considered unadaptable," says executive producer David S. Goyer. "I was an early adopter. I read the first floppy," he adds of his love of the source material. "Over the intervening decades, I would check in with Warner Bros to see who had the rights, but I didn't have enough political capital to get it going."

All that changed thanks to an encounter with the Caped Crusader... Goyer was hired to co-write *Batman Begins* with director Christopher Nolan. The success of that film—and the two mega-hit sequels which he also helped storyline—finally gave him the clout he needed to get things moving with his passion project. He pitched a *Sandman* TV show to Warner Bros, but the studio was intent on making it into a film instead.

Still, they hired Goyer to produce the movie and he accepted the job on the understanding that he could include the comic's key creator in the process. "I wanted Neil to be an executive producer. No one had ever thought to involve him before because, even eight years ago, he was already Neil Gaiman with a capital N and a capital G."

The pair worked on the feature together with actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt attached as a producer (and reportedly as the potential lead and director) in 2013. As with previous attempts, however, it eventually fizzled out. "It was too weird. It was too quirky. It was too *Sandman*—and that was the issue."

The failure of the film would turn out to be a blessing in the long run. While the studio was looking to the big screen, TV was changing →

dramatically. Netflix in particular was making waves with shows like *Orange Is the New Black* and *Stranger Things*. Goyer lobbied the studio for a TV show again – and this time they agreed. Gaiman was brought on board, as was Allan Heinberg, the series' core showrunner and another OG Sand-fan who had once queued up for the author's autograph.

The series is about as accurate an adaptation of *The Sandman* as we're ever likely to see. The 10-episode first season covers the opening two volumes of the saga, *Preludes & Nocturnes* and *The Doll's House*, stories that move between England in the early 20th century, present day America, Hell and the Dreaming. Along the way Morpheus – as our protagonist is also sometimes known – encounters William Shakespeare, a convention for serial killers, Lucifer (played with sardonic glee by Gwendoline Christie), a living nightmare known as the Corinthian and a murderous lunatic with the power to bend people's will (a terrific David Thewlis).

Of course, adapting such a monolithic work is no mean feat, even with the creator's input. The team's approach was to boil the series down to its core principles. "The first thing I always do is to try and identify the salient elements of the project," says Goyer. "What makes this *Sandman*? It's what I did with *Batman* and *Foundation*. You make a list of the five to 10 core elements that an adaptation must have. And then, is there a list of things that we should never do?"

Gaiman had some strong opinions on that last aspect. "He said, 'He doesn't go around punching people or giving big superhero speeches'. Eventually we boiled it down to: *Sandman* is a story about a god who becomes humble and human and who learns to appreciate what it means to be human and not a god."

ENTER SANDMAN

Finding the right human to portray this humble god was a particularly difficult task. More than 200 actors read for the role, including some "fairly big names, actors who are used to being offered things who we then had to say, 'Sorry, you're not going to be Morpheus' to" – before they finally picked Tom Sturridge, recently seen in miniseries *Irra Vep*.

"We felt strongly that if it was someone who was instantly recognisable all over the world then that could get in the way of the audience receiving the character," says Goyer. "Tom is known, but he's not necessarily a household name. But the moment we saw his audition, Neil and Allan and I just said, 'That's Morpheus'. I mean, we just knew instantly."

Indeed, Sturridge's Sandman will be instantly familiar to any reader of the comic. He's handsome; appropriately dreamy with a piercing gaze and spectacular shock of raven



Vivienne Acheampong as Lucienne in episode nine.



Dream has a little chat with one of his birds.



Roderick Burgess and Dream find a cat.



Mason Alexander Park plays Desire.

“This is a guy who needs to be taken down a bunch of pegs, who is a little bit of a dick”

black hair, but it never feels like the character has been given an unnecessary glow-up. He can be chilly and menacing one minute, tender or sardonic the next, but always with, as Goyer puts it, "a certain sad detachment".

"This is a guy who needs to be taken down a bunch of pegs, who is a little bit of a dick, but you still like them... There's a moment in the

first episode where you just feel really sorry for him. That's the sliver that we're going to follow throughout the whole show."

It helps that Sturridge's voice perfectly captures the character's inky black speech bubbles. "We experimented with his voice a lot. We just had to try different things, because it can easily become too stentorian and too ridiculous – and frankly, a lot of the actors that read for the part did take it that far. It's that edge of haughtiness. It has to feel effortless in the way he's using these words. It can't be Shakespeare in the Park!"

Dream isn't the only member of the Endless that we'll see in the series, of course. Almost as →

Neil Gaiman:
he won't feel
the benefits,
you know.

The Author And The Actor

NG: How has it felt to slip into this role?

TS: It feels extraordinary. I'm filled with a kind of awesome sense of trepidation and wonder.

NG: What was it like the first time you were asked to audition for Dream?

TS: I had no experience of the comics. I hadn't read them. The first thing I did was get a hold of one and have a look at it, and then I started to dive into the story. Beyond auditioning for the character, I just fell in love with *Sandman* as a piece of literature. What became terrifying about the audition was not so much trying to become him, but being so excited to potentially be a part of this world.

NG: It had to have been one of the longest audition periods of a casting that any human being has ever experienced.

TS: It was extraordinarily long. It began, I think, in February 2020,

and was a relatively traditional process. I did two or three auditions. I then had to get on a plane and do a screen test, and then the world changed, which obviously had an impact on everyone. But it did mean that I had time to become more and more familiar with the literature.

NG: How did you discover that you got the part?

TS: It was on a Zoom call with 12 different people all asking questions that one is never asked in an audition process as an actor – quite a deep, philosophical interrogation into my position on the

character and the story and the ambition for the series. After this quite haunting and terrifying hour and a half of my life, I got a phone call from Allan Heinberg. And it was an astonishing moment.

NG: Given the world was locked down, you probably didn't go out and celebrate.

TS: Do you honestly want to know what I did? I thought very carefully about how I was going to dream that night, because I wanted to find Morpheus, and I wanted to see if I could meet him in my dreams.

NG: That's amazing. I've dreamed of him a couple of times in 33 years, and they were always very

strange dreams. Taking on this role, what have your biggest fears been?

TS: Firstly, it's an awesome responsibility to take on this role simply because it's something that is so beloved, and quite rightly. At the same time, one of the things that I think is key to Dream is his sense of responsibility. I feel that one of the things that we share is this sense of duty, and so I'm hoping that those fears will actually help me.

NG: What are you most looking forward to?

TS: Encountering the other characters. What I love so much about *Sandman* is the extraordinary cast of humans and creatures and gods who've been assembled. You have Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe and Robespierre and Marco Polo; you have Cain and Abel and Lucifer; you have Johann Sebastian. I just want to watch these characters come to life.

popular as Morpheus is his sister, Death, portrayed in the comics as an infinitely compassionate goth girl. Kirby Howell-Baptiste brings warmth and humour to this very peculiar family. Desire (Mason Alexander Park) and Despair (Donna Preston) are two of Dream's more scheming siblings whose machinations will have huge ramifications for Dream further on.

"They're effectively gods, these near omnipotent beings," says Goyer, "but they're fucked-up. They're a family like any other with baggage and issues. It's just that when this particular family squabble, worlds crumble."

Of course, with the culture wars still raging on, some of the show's casting choices came under fire from some quarters of the internet. Eyebrows were raised and angry tweets smashed out at the casting of a black woman as Death and at the gender-flipping of characters like scuzzy occultist John Constantine – now Johanna – and Christie taking on the role of Lucifer Morningstar.

"It's just absolutely absurd," says Goyer, unfazed by the grumblings. "Especially given the fact that Morpheus changes shape and race and gender in the comic book. That was something that we just didn't stress about at all. We wanted to get the right person for the job so we opened it up to everyone and [cast] whoever we felt embodied the character best."

FABLES AND REFLECTIONS

Still, even ignoring such online heat, there's no doubt that *The Sandman* is a bit of a risk, if not for the creative team who have resolutely made the show they wanted to, but for Netflix, no doubt looking for its next big genre hit.

The Sandman is very different to the likes of *Stranger Things*. It changes shape, tone and genre with each episode. It's sweet and funny one moment, nightmarishly dark and violent the next, while the setting moves between cities, dimensions and time periods. Even its protagonist, Dream, is an inconstant presence, sometimes the focus of the episode, often merely a cameo.

That's, of course, how it should be, because that's the comic. For his part, Goyer is aware of the challenges facing his show, but very proud of it. "It can be scary, but if you look back at a lot of the big break-out hits that have been on television over the last decade, so many have defied conventional wisdom."

He points to *Game Of Thrones* as an example. "Everybody said, 'Oh my god it's too dark, there are way too many characters, it's never going to be a hit' – and of course it became one of the biggest hits of all time. Same with *Breaking Bad* and *Squid Game*."

The Sandman's uniqueness and complexity, he argues, is also its greatest strength. "Generally speaking, the shows that become phenomenons are the ones that defy

"One day, son, all this will be yours." "Oh. Er, yay?"

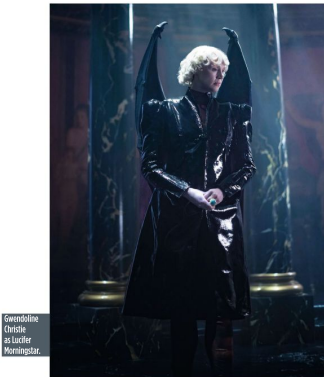
Gwendoline Christie as Lucifer Morningstar.

"We wanted to get the right person for the job so we opened it up to everyone"

convention. The audience gets excited because they're watching something different. I think one of the reasons why Neil has become such a revered storyteller is because he has a singular

voice. We feel very strongly that, even though the show is idiosyncratic and it straddles a lot of genres, that people will embrace it."

Besides, as everyone who has read *The Sandman* will know, almost every apparently unconnected detail ties together in the end. "There's a through line. You wouldn't immediately understand how this little short story that you're reading in the comics connected to the larger narrative, but it always did. Hopefully the audience will embrace that."

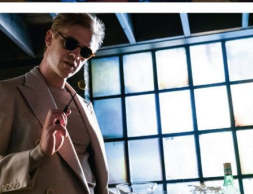


Boyd Holbrook as The Corinthian: suave.





Charles Duncane
as Rodrick
Bumpus, Ansu
Kabia as Sykes.



If they do, the team are ready and willing to tell the whole story, from the first page to the final panel of *The Wake*. "I'm excited to meet Destruction," says Goyer, referring to Dream's younger brother. "And I'm excited to get to an adaptation of [penultimate book] *The Kindly Ones*. I love all of *The Sandman*, but I really, really, really like *The Kindly Ones*. That's something that I hope that we get to." 🍷

The Sandman is on Netflix from 5 August.

The Sandman That Never Was

The story of the infamous unmade '90s movie

Attempts to bring *The Sandman* to the screen started early. Neil Gaiman was first approached about a possible movie adaptation as soon as 1991, with screenwriting duo Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio (who would go on to pen the *Pirates Of The Caribbean* films) attached. They wrote a draft that, like the TV series, adapted *Preludes & Nocturnes* and *The Doll's House*. Gaiman reportedly liked it, as did *Pulp Fiction* co-writer Roger Avary who was hired to direct the film. It was faithful in spirit to the comics and notably included the "A Dream of a Thousand Cats" sequence – perhaps one of the reasons the studio declared the script ultimately "undeliverable".

Elliott and Rossio moved on, but Avary kept working, eventually turning in his own draft. It ditched the cats, added an unwise narration from Morpheus and moved more of the action Stateside, but was still mostly true to the comics. The studio, however, still had misgivings that reached a head when Avary tried to sell them on the idea of making the sequences in Dream's kingdom look like Jan Švankmajer's art house adaptation of *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*. He eventually walked away from the project due to a creative clash with executive producer Jon Peters.

Peters was an infamous figure for comics fans in the '90s, having argued against Tim Burton's dark take on Batman. The *Sandman* movie he wanted to make would not be atmospheric and strange like the comics, but a film in which a brawling Morpheus punched his arch-enemy the Corinthian out. After Avary's departure he had a new screenplay written by William Farmer, which Gaiman famously described as "quite easily the worst script I've ever read".

Farmer is open about the problems with his screenplay. "It was clear from the start that the goal of the project was to take the Sandman name and use it as a franchise, while making the actual story something more 'for the masses,'" he told David Hughes in his book *Tales From Development Hell*. "There were things the producers wanted done that took it in a different direction, and as I was a fledgling screenwriter, I figured you take the suggestions of the ones writing the cheques."

What were those things? "The producers were adamant that the coming millennium must play a big role... Of course this was folly, as the millennium turned out to be no big deal – nobody really gave a shit." Gaiman's cerebral hero also beats people up and is revealed to be the brother of both Lucifer and the Corinthian. At least Farmer refused to write one requested scene: Morpheus at a rave. No, really.

Gaiman was enraged and publicly trashed the script, leading to a fan backlash against the potential film. Farmer's work was abandoned and *The Sandman* returned to the realm of great comics destined never to make it to the screen... until now.





RESIDENT EVIL

THE ZOMBIE
APOCALYPSE
LOOMS LARGE IN
THE **RESIDENT EVIL**
TV SERIES

WORDS: **BRYAN CAIRNS**

ZOMBIE



RESIDENT EVIL

HELLLANDS

AUGUST 2022 | SFX MAGAZINE 49



AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT, billions of zombies could chomp, gnaw, claw or feast on humanity's remaining survivors in Netflix's TV series of *Resident Evil*. Reimagining the popular Capcom videogame and movie franchise, the live-action show unfolds in both the past and the present day, chronicling the development of the T-virus right up until the zombie mayhem hits the fan.

Considering all the *RE* material out there, including anime adaptations and comic books, showrunner Andrew Dabb admits the greatest challenge in fleshing out the concept was providing a "fresh point of view" that engaged older fans, while catering to newer audiences unfamiliar with the property.

"That's what the game does so well," Dabb tells SFX. "*The Resident Evil* franchise reinvents itself in the videogame. If you look from game one to the recent *Village*, it's a very different type of game. They've been horror. They've been action. They've been first-person shooters. Now, they are kind of a horror-action combo. So, for us, it was not necessarily about reinventing the wheel. It was about taking the wheel and driving on a new road."

ARC LIFE

Resident Evil's narrative splits between dual timelines. In 2012, teenage sisters Billie (Siena Agudong) and Jade (Tamara Smart), along with their father, Albert Wesker (Lance Reddick), relocate to New Raccoon City. It's here that the Umbrella Corporation employs Albert. It's also the year an unleashed T-virus ignites a global zombie apocalypse. Flash forward to 2036 in London, where an adult Jade (Ella Balinska) strives to stay alive in a world occupied by ghoulish creatures.

"We've seen a lot of zombie outbreaks, first phases of the zombie outbreak or the first two weeks into the zombie outbreak," Dabb says.

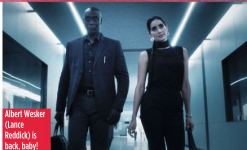
"What we haven't seen as much of is the lead up to the zombie outbreak. And we haven't seen a lot of what the world would look like 15 years after the zombie outbreak. That was the idea in broad strokes... Explore those areas of the zombie genre that we haven't explored quite as much.

"Then, with the younger characters, it's a coming-of-age story with a *Resident Evil* twist," he continues. "Instead of, 'Oh, I like this boy. And I'm going to graduate from college or go to prom,' it's more like, 'Oh, my dad is this person. Umbrella does this.' In the future storyline, it's seeing how those revelations changed these people. The present-day Jade is very different than the Jade in the future. The same with Billie. So, how do they change? How did they evolve? How did this crucible they've been through shape them in ways that are good

“Zombies are a threat in the way that great white sharks are a threat in the ocean”

or bad? We are telling the arc of their lives. And what would it be like for someone going through this, who is at the heart of it, who is potentially the cause of it? What burden would that put on your shoulder? What would you feel you owed the world?"

Fifteen years into the apocalypse, the zombie outbreaks have come and gone. "Zombies are a threat in the way that great white sharks are a threat in the ocean," Dabb says. "Except six billion citizens have died and turned into zombies, or what they refer to as 'zeros'.



Albert Wesker (Lance Reddick) is back, baby!

"The world is completely reshaped," Dabb explains. "To some degree, the reset button has been hit. Some places are very primitive. In some places, religion has taken over. Some places, where rich people have built their bunkers and compounds, are pretty nice and modern."

Resident Evil opens with the grown-up Jade on a mission to collect data about the infected. That's when something goes horribly wrong. Haunted by her father's association with the Umbrella Corporation and the fate of her sister, Jade's goal is to make the world a better place – even though, for unknown reasons, she's being hunted down.

"Jade was there for the original outbreak," Dabb explains. "She has lived through every part of this. She is someone who is devoted to discovering a way to make the world liveable again. There is no cure for this disease. There is no vaccine for this disease. It is something like influenza or cancer, but the victims of this disease are walking around trying to bite you. Jade also knows that the virus has mutated. She's looking for evidence of that happening.

Wesker's just seen the power bill for the Corp.

Siena Agudong as young Billie (and friend).



BUGS LIFE

Ella Balinska on zombies, Lickers and giant caterpillars



Young Billie and Jade, way back here in 2007.

You're gonna need a bigger Resident Evil, probably.

If the virus mutates, it could be less deadly. It could change behaviours.

"As for Billie, in the present day, she is a key player," he adds. "She's the one that convinces them to go to the Umbrella lab. She is the driving force behind a lot of the choices that are maybe not working out so great. We will meet her a little bit later in the season. You will see a character that, like Jade, has been changed in some ways for the better and in some ways, we would argue, for the worst."

DEAD MAN WALKING

Then there's Albert Wesker, who stands as the perennial bad guy in the Resident Evil universe. It makes sense that this version is harbouring some dark secrets. But considering that the console games serve as canon for the TV series – and that, in them, Wesker perished – how the heck is he still standing in the flesh, here and now? Perhaps the vials of his children's blood that Wesker stores in the lab, and injects into himself, hold the key to that question...

"In game five, Wesker was blown up by a rocket launcher inside of a volcano," acknowledges Dabb. "It happens. We've all been there! But the Albert Wesker on our show is the Albert Wesker after that. I will say there will be a very good explanation of why he is back and why he is the way that he is. That explanation does not include that he happened to be wearing volcano- and rocket launcher-proof clothes.

"His journey is somebody who is really trying to make up for sins of the past, some that were his and some which weren't," he continues. "He is also someone who is into self-preservation. In the first episode, you see him injecting himself with the girls' blood. There's something going on there. They may be more to him than just the daughters."

In *Resident Evil*, not all of the living dead crave brains or shuffle slowly. In fact, these zeros run. Very, very fast.

Resident Evil unfolds over two timelines.

How have the events of the past influenced the *Jade* of 2036?

Jade hasn't really experienced the life of a normal person would. She still has that drive and that fight to right her wrongs. For me, the really cool thing is the way she goes about these extraordinary situations, but she's not specially trained in fighting. She really is just a person who has learned, from the ground up, how to fight and survive and figure things out on her own. A lot of the decisions she makes may not be the right decision, but she will make it, realise she messed up and do her best to figure things out.

How would you describe Jade's history with the Umbrella Corporation?

She has never been a fan of Umbrella, from the beginning through to now. If there is anything consistent, it's that. Her dad is a very important man within the company.

Jade has a bit of a tumultuous relationship with her dad. They [Umbrella and Wesker] kind of represent each other for her. Her dad and the company are negative in her eyes. She had to move to New Raccoon City and uproot everything she knew and loved.

Jade tangles with a giant, mutated caterpillar in the pilot. What went into filming that sequence?

We shot this entire series in Cape Town, South Africa. That whole segment was filmed on the roof of the Civic Centre. Because we were in the peak of the pandemic, it was crazy, because there were no aircraft. There was no background noise. It was almost the perfect setting for something like this. What normally would have been a bunch of greenscreen to hide the general population was just imagination and zombie enthusiasts.

We did it bit by bit. It was a lot of running and falling on the ground as this caterpillar ravages through this camp. We had a fair amount of training with wirework, just to get the dynamics and size of how big we wanted this caterpillar, so that special effects had everything they needed. After that, it was a 45-minute session in a studio, with a bluescreen, me attached to a wire being thrown around.

What was your favourite zombie?

I have to say one of my favourite sequences that I filmed throughout the entire series was Jade's encounter with the Licker. They are an absolute classic Resident Evil monster.

"These are not shambling zombies," explains Dabb. "These are not the risen dead. These are living people that are infected with the virus. They haven't died and come back. If you cut off their arm, they can bleed out. These are real people that have a disease, I think that makes them a little different than your standard zombie," he continues.

"They are driven by one need, which is to feed or spread the virus, in our case. So how do they affect other people? How does it affect you when your loved one is being turned? How does it affect you when the place you lived in, and felt safe, is being over-run?"

Dabb may be conscious of servicing the Resident Evil fandom, but he says that won't be the narrative's driving force. Nonetheless, viewers can expect to see monstrous caterpillars, mutated Lickers and, of course, zombie dogs.

"The dogs are the iconic Resident Evil monster," Dabb concludes. "They were in there from the very beginning. They are such a hallmark of the lore. They kind of plant your flag. That being said, the dogs are pretty crazy, but trust me when I say... we go crazier." ●

Resident Evil is on Netflix from 14 July.



REMEMBRANCE OF THE DALEKS

WITH THE PETER CUSHING-STARRING **DALEK MOVIES** NEWLY RESTORED IN 4K, WE TALK TO ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ANTHONY WAYE

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN

THE BEATLES MAY HAVE BEEN "MORE popular than Jesus" by 1966, but in 1964 the Daleks were providing some stiff competition. Their appearance in *Doctor Who*'s second adventure captured the public imagination, launching a wave of merchandising. So the time was ripe for someone savvy to place them – as the eventual trailer excitedly declared – "in colour on the big screen, closer than ever before!"

Alert to the money-spinning potential of the craze, producer Joe Vegoda secured the rights to the Daleks' TV debut from the BBC. Milton Subotsky – co-founder of Amicus, the British studio behind anthology horrors like *Dr Terror's House Of Horrors* – set about compressing Terry Nation's scripts into a screenplay, turning the Doctor into a "brilliant science professor" (played in avuncular fashion by Peter Cushing). As Amicus was strongly associated with horror, it was decided to present this more child-friendly offering under the company name AARU Productions.

When originally announced, the director attached was Freddie Francis, the Oscar-winning cinematographer on films like *The Innocents*, who had also directed for Amicus. However, by the time production on *Dr Who & The Daleks* began at Shepperton Studios he had – for reasons lost in the mists of time – been replaced by Gordon Flemying (soon to father actor Jason).

"Right beside Gordon" and "running the whole show, basically" was assistant director Anthony Waye. When shooting began in March 1965 he was – like cinematographer John Wilcox, and the film's leading man –

fresh off Amicus horror *The Skull*, which wrapped 17 days earlier. (As Freddie Francis directed that too, maybe he just needed a bit of a break?)

Waye, who went on to work on the sequel too, tells SFX his overriding impression is that "they were very cheap budget movies" – £180,000 in the case of the first. "We were up against it all the time, money-wise. The schedules were so tight and the budgets were so mean that you just had to bash on and shoot as much as you could a day."

Waye characterises his Glaswegian director as "a disciplined man" but "quite a handful": "He needed a little kick now and again, but they all do! It's a first assistant who puts the discipline down, and you've also got to discipline the director to some degree." →



Like everyone who worked with the actor, he remembers Peter Cushing as a model of professionalism. "He was always on time and knew his words," Wayne says. "He was meticulous in where he placed his props and that sort of thing. He was friendly – he would speak with you – but he kept himself to himself. If he'd finished several takes, he'd go back to his room. He was a little bit pedantic, but that's how he played the Doctor. I don't think you'd play it quite so doddery nowadays."

The Daleks, meanwhile, presented all the usual problems encountered by generations of TV crew. "You had to always have a flat surface for them to travel on. So you had to cheat a little bit, now and again, to get them on different levels. And for the poor people inside, it was enormous work to push them around."

Three experienced operators from the TV series were hired. But with the pepperpots' ranks comprising eight fully operational props, five more were needed. "I think most of them were dancers," Wayne says, "and pretty fit people, but it was pretty hot and sticky in there – especially when we had action sequences, if we threw a smoke bomb underneath them. But they never moved that far. The sets weren't that big, and the movements were restricted."

“If you were to shoot them now I think you'd certainly edit them much slicker”

Notably taller due to a raised base, these specially-built movie Daleks were resplendent in Technicolor-friendly liveries of blue, silver and gold; red, black and gold; and black, gold and silver.

"I remember there were fire extinguishers inside," Wayne adds, "because you had a visual spray come out." This was a compromise, as Subotsky's original idea was to have them firing flames. However, on submitting the script to the BBFC he was advised that this might be too strong for the U certificate he wanted.

The supporting cast, including jazz musician Roy Castle as accidental companion Ian, were, Wayne says, "easy to get on with." "With Roberta Tovey [the Doctor's granddaughter Susan] she was only allowed to work for a certain time, and you had to give certain time for education. So you had to schedule around that."

Tovey, 11 years old at the time, later recalled (in 1995 documentary *Dalekmania*) how her studies were somewhat disrupted by Castle practising his trumpet: "I'd be trying to concentrate on history and then you'd get carried away and start singing along with some of the tunes."

On the plus side, he benefited from the director's unique system of financial



Roy Castle prepares to set a record for nail prattals.

Everyone loves Sugar Puffs. Can you spot the product placement?

Susan gets the interrogation treatment.

TRIVIA

The movie Daleks made their on-screen debut in episode three of TV story "The Chase", after three props were hired to the BBC. Their bigger bases were removed.

Ten days before the first film came out, Roberta Tovey released a tie-in novelty single, "Who's Who".

The costs of making the Daleks for the second film were apparently shared with stage play *The Curse Of The Daleks*, which also used the props.

While Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 AD was shooting in Shepperton Studio B, *Casino Royale* (starring David Niven) was filming in Studio A.

The Dalek spaceship model was later reused in the 1969 British sci-fi film *The Body Stealers*.

incentivisation. "If I did a shot in one take he would give me a shilling, he told me. Every time I did he said, 'Right, I owe you another shilling.' On the last day of filming he called me over and gave me this little bag. It says [on it] 'To one-take Tovey, love Gordon', and inside are 21 shillings."

LONDON'S BURNING

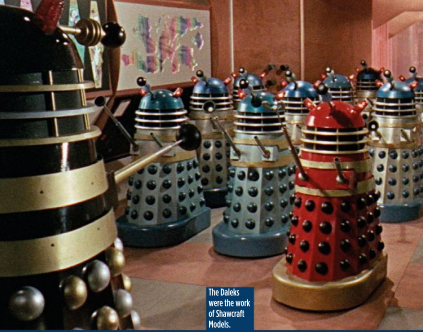
On release in August 1965, the film rode the wave of Dalekmania to become one of the most profitable British films of the year. A sequel was a no-brainer. This time, Subotsky adapted 1964's "The Dalek Invasion Of Earth", in which the TARDIS lands in a ruined 22nd century London, and finds that the conquering Daleks' plans involve drilling down into the Earth from a mine in Bedfordshire.

"The first one did quite well financially, giving them more money to make the second one," Wayne says (specifically, £286,000).

Though that did have to stretch further. "It certainly had more content, and we had more work on the backlot: the forest and the mine and the ruined street. They were quite expensive set-ups for those days."

Nearly all the exteriors for Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150AD were shot on the Shepperton backlot. One notable exception was the iconic scene (retained from TV) where a Dalek – for no discernible reason – rises out of the Thames.

Wayne says he'd have helped choose the location, but reckons this was shot by a second unit crew. "It would take time to set up, as you had to set it up in low tide and then shoot it in higher tide. I'm sure it was down Greenwich way, or somewhere like that. Obviously you had to have the Dalek on rails that you could slide up, and a cable to pull it out of the water, so you'd need a winch behind the camera."



The Daleks were the work of Shawcraft Models.



"I dunno why, but I could murder some Sugar Puffs."

The film is notorious among fans for its curious product placement. Despite nominally being set 184 years in the future, clothes, vehicles and technology haven't advanced – and neither have breakfast cereals! Eagle-eyed viewers can glimpse an advertising poster for Sugar Puffs in four scenes, most prominently when the TARDIS lands by the Thames. Squint hard enough and you can also just glimpse a blurry packet in rebel leader Dormtum's office.

Waye pleads his innocence. "I have no recollection at all about Sugar Puff! I don't remember any conversation where it was said, 'Make sure you feature the Sugar Puffs poster'. I was not aware of it." Whatever the exact deal with Quaker Oats, cross-promotion was clearly part of it. The film was splashed on the back of packets, with cereal buyers given the chance to win one of three Dalek props.

Shooting on Shepperton's H stage saw the most memorable on-set incident, in a scene

where a captured rebel makes a run for it and is exterminated. "Eddie Powell was the stuntman," Waye recalls. "He was Clint Eastwood's stunt double on *Where Eagles Dare*. Eddie was shot off the top of a wall, fell down onto the ground and broke his ankle. We had to send him off to the hospital to get it plastered.

"Then we brought him back and did the close-up [of him lying dead]. There was a certain amount of agony, but we just told him to shut up and smile! Or rather, don't smile..." Impressively, Powell soldiered on as stunt coordinator, using crutches.

This time, the box office receipts were less stellar; there would be no third cinematic outing for the Daleks. Waye got on well enough with his director to stay in touch for a while; he recalls a social occasion at Christmas 1966. "We went to Gordon's house, and there was a seat singer – very famous at the time – and a lot of famous people there. They were quite well

PETERING OUT

Cushing's third TARDIS trip

Three or four months after *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150AD* wrapped, Peter Cushing took on the role again in a radio pilot made by Stanmark Productions – a company co-founded by Richard Bates, previously story editor on *The Avengers*. Cushing was actually their third choice, after Boris Karloff and character actor Robert Coote.

The project got as far as a contract for 52 25-minute episodes being signed before stalling due to lack of interest from the BBC (the head of the Light Programme dismissed the pilot as "pretty dull") and broadcasters overseas.

Malcolm Hulke (later to create the Silurians) scripted the pilot, which introduces the Doctor and Susan in similar fashion to TV's "An Unearthly Child", and ends with policeman's son Mike Logan transported to the American Revolution. Sadly, no recording has survived, but you can read the script in issue three of *Who mag Nothing At The End Of The Lane* (endofthelane.co.uk).



connected, because I think Gordon's wife was a singer. And I did work with Gordon again in 1969 on *The Last Grenade*, quite a big film we shot in Hong Kong and Spain with Richard Attenborough and Stanley Baker."

Later credits included *Star Wars*, *The Elephant Man* and numerous Bonds, with Waye eventually rising to producer roles on that franchise, from *GoldenEye* through to *Quantum Of Solace*.

It's fair to say that the Dalek movies do not hold a special place in his heart. "Personally, I think they're as boring as anything!" he confesses. "Partly, maybe, because Peter Cushing was that pedantic Doctor – when he moved across a room, he went across quite slowly. If you were to shoot them now I think you'd certainly edit them much slicker."

Still, it was gainful employment – enough, he notes, to support a mortgage, a car, two young children and a smoking habit... "I dug out my original contracts," Waye says, waving about some paperwork at his end of the Zoom call. "Sixty quid a week. And I got paid the same on both, so I didn't even go up the following year. "Cheapskates!" he laughs. ●

Dr Who & The Daleks is available to buy now on 4K Blu-ray, released by StudioCanal. *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 AD* follows on 18 July.



THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS

LOST CH

SKY'S NEW
VERSION OF
**THE MIDWICH
CUCKOOS**

ISN'T THE FIRST
ATTEMPT AT
TELEVISIONING THE
CLASSIC JOHN
WYNDHAM BOOK.
WE LOOK AT A 2001
PITCH WHICH
FAILED TO HATCH

WORDS: IAN BERRIMAN

I L D R E N

AFTER TWO MOVIE VERSIONS, *THE Midwich Cuckoos*, John Wyndham's 1957 novel about a village where every woman of child-bearing age becomes pregnant after a mysterious "Dayout", was recently adapted for television. But lead writer David Farr wasn't the first to have a crack at it.

Two decades ago Stephen Gallagher, the man behind '80s *Doctor Who*'s "Warriors' Gate" and "Terminus" and ITV drama *Eleventh Hour*, was enlisted to help with development on various Wyndham properties by rights-holder Mark Samuelson (now an executive producer on the 2022 version).

"Mark asked me to do a breakdown of what I thought the TV potential was in a lot of the Wyndham material," Gallagher tells *SEX*. "I remember saying that one of the problems with adapting *The Kraken Wakes* is that people are going to be expecting a kraken and expecting it to wake, and neither of those are in the book!"

He wasn't the only writer involved. Stephen Volk, who scripted *Ghostwatch* and created ITV's *Afterlife*, completed a second-draft screenplay for *The Chrysalids*. Gallagher, meanwhile, was tasked with cracking *The Midwich Cuckoos* – and found himself facing a conundrum. On the one hand, he felt there was no point doing a period piece. "[1960 movie] *Village Of The Damned* had done that so well. You'd be putting yourself up against that for comparison – a no-win situation."

On the other hand, he saw a fundamental problem with modernisation. "Because we live in different times, the situation is different," the writer explains. "The notion of →

a small army unit and a country copper being able to seal off a village in the middle of England and nobody raising an eyebrow just doesn't play." As he put it in his pitch document, "These kids would all be signed up to the tabloids... Tourists would flock to the village and buy 'Little Angel' tea-towels."

Gallagher's solution was to take the children out of Midwich. In doing so, he drew upon *Midwich Main*, a sequel Wyndham began writing but abandoned. This partial manuscript now resides in the John Wyndham Archive at The University of Liverpool – to which Gallagher paid a visit.

"It's about 70 pages of typescript, double-spaced," Gallagher explains. "It has a character investigating the phenomenon at Midwich. All the kids have scattered around the globe, so he's tracking them down. In the course of doing that, he begins to realise that the choices he's making aren't necessarily his own, and that the kids are controlling him. I formed this notion that if you took the substance of that material and blended it with the original *Midwich Cuckoos*, you could produce something modern and new, and entirely true to Wyndham."

“Don't conveniently ignore the implications of DNA testing, but carry them through”

In his pitch, he describes this material as “fresh yeast” which provides the means to “rerun the creative process from square one”, taking into account medical advances and cultural changes. “Don't conveniently ignore the implications of DNA testing, but carry them through,” Gallagher wrote. “Don't pretend that the media wouldn't take an interest, but think about how that interest would add to the complications.”

When it came to the children, Gallagher planned to return to the novel, in which they're almost impossible to tell apart, via visual effects. “I would have just used two kids [one boy, one girl], then multiplied them, so they would have been genuinely identical. You put them in blonde wigs [in the movies] so you can make a lot of different kids look quite similar. Whereas if you're using identical kids, that's spooky enough in itself.”

Summing up his take, Gallagher says it would have been “a genuinely creepy, disturbing horror show, the kind of thing where you think, ‘This really could happen’ and gets under your skin.”

He namechecks two horror movies as examples of the ideal *modus operandi*. A passage from the book where alien involvement is hinted at by aerial photos



The 1995 movie led to Gallagher's pitch stalling.



Gallagher didn't want to replicate the 1960 movie.

of a “pale oval outline” in Midwich could have made it in. “One of the great moments in *The Thing* [1982] is where they see something through the ice,” Gallagher says. “They form a circle, then the camera pulls back, and there's something under the ice that you can't see, that's a perfect circle.”

“And sometimes what happens off-screen is more disturbing than any effect you can see on-screen,” he adds. “Somebody walks out of one room and walks back into it a couple of minutes later – like that scene in *Poltergeist* with the chairs [where Diane Freeling turns to find chairs stacked on the kitchen table], all done in one shot.”

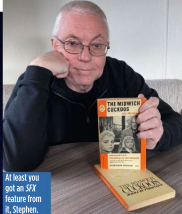
Unfortunately, a legal tussle sparked by the makers of the 1995 *Village Of The Damned* movie placed the project into limbo. “Mark was quite keen, and was looking to give me the

green light,” Gallagher recalls. “But the producers of the John Carpenter remake announced a TV series that they didn't have the rights to do. Mark had to take them to court, and it dragged out. I think what eventually happened was that the option ran out.”

Although this was “a great disappointment,” Gallagher is philosophical about it, noting that only about “one in five” projects makes it to the screen. Two years ago, he was set to fly to New Zealand for a “massive international project”, then Covid-19 hit and “the moment came and went”. Another time, he was packing his bag when a US series was bumped from ABC's schedule in favour of a Steven Spielberg show. “I said to my agent, ‘The one thing you learn in this business is you learn to bounce.’ Then, of course, I punched the wall!”

ALAN

GALLAGHER'S TAKE ON *THE Midwich Cuckoos* progressed no further than a 1,900-word pitch document, written in December 2001. It's split into two parts: an introduction explaining the rationale behind how he'd approach it, followed by a 15-point breakdown of the main plot beats – reproduced here in full.



At least you got an *SFX* feature from it, Stephen.

THE PITCH

Stephen Gallagher's synopsis

1 Midwich is cut off, but instead of the two-puzzled-coppers-and-a-piece-of-string response it quickly escalates into the full emergency turnout which results in the extent of the "invisible dome" being fully perceived but not explained. Its effects are undeniable but the causes are undetectable. They send in robot cameras, they photograph from the air all parts of the spectrum. Maybe they send a crop-dusting plane over and, for one chilling moment, the shape of the dome appears in the falling spray. All these will provide is scant evidence that something happened – an inexplicable shadow here, a blur as if something was moving there – but they'll record nothing definitive.

2 Who's the main character? The book is narrated by Richard Gayford, a writer who passively reports on the events and has no hands-on role in the story. I'd lose Gayford completely and focus on Alan Hughes, the Army lieutenant with a romantic stake in the village. I'd move him centre-stage and I'd make him the hero, sticking with him throughout. He has both a professional and a personal involvement in the events. As well as him being the military's man-on-the-ground, his girlfriend at the manor house [Ferrelyn] (the one he was on his way to visit when the weirdness happened) is one of the women affected by the mysterious visitation.

3 Everyone in the village is given medical screening for toxic effects or lasting damage, and it's at this point that it's found that all the women are newly pregnant. But there's no conceivable causal link and so they're forced to the conclusion that it's a statistical anomaly or if there is a link, it's one that can't be explained or confirmed. So in purely scientific terms, it's without status.

4 All the women are offered genetic testing. Our hero is right in the thick of this, arranging logistics on the ground just as the Army did in the foot and mouth crisis [in 2001]. So we've got Army Land Rovers dashin' about the English countryside, a big Army tent on the village green, germ warfare units providing facilities for the gene scientists... The vision is of the Army as a can-do support entity, working amongst civilians.

5 By the genes, it looks as if the women are bearing monsters. All are offered abortions, with counselling to help them reach the decision.

6 The father of an under-age teenager doesn't wait for counselling but puts his daughter straight in for abortion. The procedure is successful and the tissue is kept for study. But it's then realised that as the procedure was taking place, every woman carrying a foetus suffered a reaction.

7 All the women go weird (they don't know it, but the survival instincts of the unborn children are driving them now). All refuse the abortions. One by one, they pressure their husbands and disappear. Those whose husbands won't cooperate disappear anyway. Not all go; like one woman who's sold all rights in her story to one of the papers.

8 Maybe another gets murdered by her husband. These are not happy families. A quick and covert operation kicks in to remove the foetus from the post-mortem and compare it with the previous one. Our hero's put in charge of this, and is less than happy about the change in his role. The abnormalities are gross.

9 The child of the woman who didn't run is born, and it's normal in every way. The abnormalities vanished in the last phase of foetal development. She refuses to co-operate in any further investigations and there are no legal grounds for pressing her to. The media storm dies down in a matter of weeks because there's nothing unusual to get excited over, and because it's run a certain course; the more the story became tabloid property, the more it was

avoided by the broadsheets. It ends up as a *Sunday Sport* kind of story.

10 The woman withdraws into a hermit-like existence and our hero is moved after a while to seek her out, only to find that her child has developed at an unusual rate. After 12 weeks, he's like a two-year-old.

11 Our hero becomes obsessive about tracking down the other children, and works to assemble them all together in some secret location; what he doesn't realise at first is that he's being driven by them.

12 The children as they develop have some sinister purpose. Their secret location is remote and isolated; a derelict village or some closed-down outpost that they open up like a ghost town. On an island, for example. They exert control over everything that goes in and out. By the time the authorities become aware, they've got everything set up and are ready to defend themselves. Maybe there's a raid that goes disastrously wrong, like the FBI attack on Waco. It leaves a crashed plane with live missiles on a remote end of the island.

13 The only person who can move in and out freely is our main character. It's not so much that they trust him, but that they believe they can control him fully. There's a reason for this. During the isolation of Midwich and the subsequent investigation, he's the hero of the hour. But the pressures thereafter destroy his relationship, and combined with the conflicts of his public and private roles (he knows more than he can tell Ferrelyn, and the knowledge is more than he can bear alone) it undoes him. He drinks, seriously and secretly, as a way to keep on functioning. He doesn't realise it, but that's how the children slip into his head without him knowing. He goes AWOL and becomes a disgraced renegade as he operates to gather them together, using his Army skills, and turning himself into a wanted man. Finding the runaway Ferrelyn is the bait that the children dangle before him.

14 Made to realise he's been serving their purpose, he takes it into his own hands to end it. Sobering up shuts them out of the deepest levels of his consciousness or even better, lets out the demons that he's been drinking to suppress so that no-one else can bear to enter his head.

15 He gets Ferrelyn off the island on some pretext, and goes back alone. Those unexploded missiles on that downed helicopter are the key to the finale. She's saved and he's redeemed as he dies with the children.

CHACE CRAWFORD

We dive deep with the star of *The Boys*

Words by Bryan Cairns // Photography by Andrew Timms

Chace Crawford is a loser – at least on the superhero satire *The Boys* – and he wouldn't have it any other way. The *Gossip Girl* alumnus portrays the Deep, the amphibious member of the Seven, whose “impressive” superpowers consist of breathing underwater and communicating with sea creatures. Those lame-o abilities, combined with the Deep's narcissism, social awkwardness and a running gag that involves his aquatic pals continually getting slaughtered in macabre fashion, has cemented the Aquaman rip-off's status as the funniest character on the series. *SFX* caught up with Crawford to chat calendars, comedy and the Deep's unlucky streak.

Once upon a time, you auditioned for the role of Captain America. What speaks to you about the superhero genre?

☞ For me, growing up, one of them was the big *Batman* animated series from the early '90s. The original *Batman*, Adam West, and some of those early Superman movies and Tim Burton... I was a massive fan of all that.

As the Deep in *The Boys*, what is it like to be the guy who's the brunt of so many jokes?

☞ It's great. It's part of the territory. From the original audition scenes, it was more of a satire. We are going to make fun of the privileged white male asshole, which has always been the joke there. We have fun on set. They let me improv and make it really funny. It's a great collaborative effort. It's fun to play with the relationship with Homelander and the pecking order. I love doing the jokes. I love doing comedy and making fun of that guy.

You texted Jensen Ackles that this season was so bizarre that you might not work again in Hollywood...

☞ People have probably never seen dailies like that [for the “Herogasm” plot] come in for those three weeks of shooting. [Showrunner] Eric Kripke was probably like, “This has never happened in the history of filmmaking.” There's some crazy shit. It was wild. That's the show. They really push the envelope.

When you get a script like that, how often do you think to yourself, “Can we really get away with this?”

☞ All the time. I'm thinking, “It will never be like that.” I'll get those double-double goldenrod pages [of script

revisions] and that will be gone. But we learned early on in season one, if you do anything to push the envelope in the improv, they want that. That will make the show.

After the scenes with the whale and the dolphin, can you ever look at sea creatures the same way again?

☞ It makes me think twice when a dolphin comes up to me in the ocean. That dolphin scene... Back then, we didn't really know, tonally, if any of it was going to work. My stuff, and that plane sequence with Homelander, was all so intense. Then we have this dolphin, and I didn't know how it was all going to work. Everybody was wondering, but it was really funny. We had a lot of fun with it, and it just became the tone of the show.

Season one's press kit featured a Deep calendar. What was it like shooting that?

☞ That was awesome. We got there a month early before we started filming. We did these group shots. Right away, they wanted to do this faux Calvin Klein ad. I was like, “That's perfect.” We did this fake soya sauce commercial, as if the Deep was a celebrity and speaking bad Japanese. It was funny and in-world, meta stuff. It was right up my alley. I wish we could do more.

Did you get a chuckle out of some of the exaggerated images in particular?

☞ I did. I got a huge laugh. I don't think there was anything intentional with them going on there, but I got a whole new audience...

A lot of people recognise you from *Gossip Girl* or *The Covenant*. Going into *The Boys*, did you feel like you had something to prove?

☞ You are 100% right. You kind of get stuck in a show like *Gossip Girl*, with this pretty boy. These types of shows don't come around that often and when I read the script for *The Boys*, I got it. I get this satire. I get what they are trying to do, and it's brilliant. In the audition scene, I was like, “I got this. This is going to be a really fun reinvention for me.” I know what I am capable of. I know what I would like to do, and this is exactly what I want to do as a nice switch-up. I really like comedy and improv. I like the collaborative nature and doing things a little bigger and having more freedom. It's been a real blessing. ●

The Boys is on Prime Video now.

BIODATA

From
Lubbock, Texas

Greatest Hits
“Golden boy”
Nate Archibald
in *Gossip Girl*,
magically-
powered “Son
of Ipswich” Tyler
Simms in *The
Covenant*, Billy
LeFever in oil
business soap
Blood & Oil.

Random Fact
During high
school, Crawford
worked in an
Abercrombie &
Fitch store and
modelled for
Hollister.



“When I read the script for *The Boys*, I get what they are trying to do, and it's brilliant”



SCREAM IF YOU WANNA GO FASTER

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS THEME PARKS ARE CHANGING THE GAME WITH MOVIE RIDES – WE TOOK
A TRIP ON THE **JURASSIC WORLD VELOCICOASTER** TO FIND OUT MORE WORDS: DARREN SCOTT



We mean,
how scary
could it be...
oh, Okay.



THE WORLD MAY HAVE GONE INTO a forced “hibernation” of sorts but life, ah... finds a way. While many were busying themselves with Zoom, others were working on a different kind of zoom entirely – namely building

Florida’s fastest, tallest and most intense launch rollercoaster ever. And, now that travel has re-opened, you can take a trip to the newly-expanded Jurassic World – albeit the much safer version at Universal Studios’ Islands Of Adventure in Orlando, Florida.

In production since 2017, and looking to elevate guest thrills to the next level, it was decided that Jurassic World made the most sense for the evolution of the theme park and the future of rollercoasters.

“We treated VelociCoaster like it was truly at Jurassic World, an attraction that existed just off-screen in the movies,” Universal’s Senior Show Producer Shelby Honea tells *SFX*. “We placed our attraction shortly before the events of the first *Jurassic World* film, when the park is operating as intended. The premise is simple, and classically *Jurassic* – VelociCoaster gives you the next-level animal encounter, a ‘prey’s eye view’ that is only possible at Jurassic World. What could go wrong! As theme park designers, it’s beyond fun to imagine how a coaster would exist alongside real velociraptors.

“The dinosaurs are the most enduring aspect of the franchise. Their natural world will always feel timeless and that’s why we chose the raptor paddock as a major setting.”

SMELL THE FEAR

As is the way with Universal Studios, you’ve seen the film, now *live* the film. In this case, that means escaping from apex predators – specifically Velociraptors – in Jurassic World VelociCoaster. Throughout the ride you’ll experience 22 different raptors in fact; we would say “come face-to-face with”, but at these speeds you might not catch ‘em all...

Not only are you going to see them, you’re going to *smell* them. Yes, Universal worked with a scent company to truly cover all bases. Because, as with most modern day theme parks, the actual ride is only a part of the experience – with the queue and entrance to VelociCoaster creating an immersive dinosaur habitat from the start. Surrounded by 36,000 square feet of elaborate rockwork, a giant waterfall and lush jungle vegetation, the space the ride inhabits is more than just a track.

“The approach for queues has changed considerably, especially here at Universal,” Honea explains. “Our story starts the moment our guests walk under the marquee. Queues are a prologue to the action on the ride. For Jurassic World VelociCoaster, the queue story was doubly important. Given the dynamics and ➔



The ride's layout shown as an initial sketch.

speed of the coaster, we have limited opportunity to deliver the key story beats – knowing most people will be closing their eyes and screaming for the duration of the ride. In our queue we needed to establish that guests are here at Jurassic World, but also build the tension and play with the natural anxiety one feels when waiting for a coaster... a coaster with raptors!

"The first rooms start bright, airy and brimming with Jurassic World corporate polish. As you move deeper, the rooms are darker and smaller – again building the tension. In our final room, Claire Dearing and Owen Grady introduce the coaster and provide a colourful safety briefing. We love to watch the guests in this scene; some enjoy a tense laugh as the characters banter, and others are dead silent, knowing they are about to board! Mission accomplished!"

HISTORY REPEATING

Original cast Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howard and BD Wong reprise their roles as Owen Grady, Claire Dearing and Dr Henry Wu.

"We wrote the scripts internally, and then worked with Universal Pictures and Colin Trevorrow to make sure the script and tone felt authentic to the characters," Honea explains. "Filming took place on the historical Universal Studios Hollywood backlot shortly before filming started for *Dominion*. We filmed the scene simultaneously on two sections of the stage, so that banter you see was authentic as the actors played against each other."

It's in these early rooms that you'll first encounter Blue, Charlie, Delta and Echo in a state of the art raptor paddock where the caged creatures will move and breathe on you.

"For our animated figures, we were fortunate to work with some of the best creature designers in the world," Honea says. "While small, each raptor holds an impressive number of functions. My favourite is the muzzle flutter. It's such a subtle movement, but it brings so much life and nuance. Even the eyeballs are an incredible process, using layers of precious metals and inks to capture the depth and brightness in the iris."

If you weren't nervous before, you get the chance to see the VelociCoaster taking off via windows in the queue... but you're not the only ones watching, as you'll witness raptors chasing after the recently departed guests.

"The raptor windows are an epic effect that we developed in house," Honea tells us. "We had a very cool opportunity to open the walls



The view from the raptor paddock. Very nice!



Nervous laughter as the queue progresses...





An artist's conceptual rendering of the ride.



Concept rendering compared to real effect.



Coaster cars await their victims... or, guests.



Constructing the coaster: it took a while, you know.



"Ooooooh gaaaaaaawd heeeeeelp meeeeee!"

and let guests in the queue see into the 70mph launch. That alone was very cool, but we challenged ourselves to deliver a way to put the raptors out in that launch as well. That scene is a great example of cutting-edge audio/video technology, lighting and media, combined with traditional effects to create something new."

Technology, Honea says, is not what drives the creation of new rides at Universal. "We develop the most compelling story, and then look for the best technology to achieve that. Where no known technology exists, we create new solutions."

DINO EASTER EGGS

But it's not all about cutting-edge technology and fancy effects – VelociCoaster is filled with simple old-fashioned Easter eggs too. "We hope that the love and respect for the Jurassic franchise is evident in the details!" Honea grins. "Nothing is an accident. Some of my favourite Easter eggs are the call backs to the original *Jurassic Park* series.

"In our trainer lockers, there's a new book from Dr Ellie Sattler – it was very special to get her name on that shelf. There's also a *Dominion* Easter egg, if you keep your eyes peeled for the book from Ian Malcolm."

There's even Easter eggs for theme park enthusiasts, Honea notes. "VelociCoaster sits on land once occupied by a walk-through experience called Triceratops Encounter. One of the 'Dino Chow' bags from that attraction is visible coming out of our second inversion..."

"We spend a considerable amount of time gathering reference photos, working with the filmmakers, and establishing a visual language that is consistent with the world we are trying to make. Some examples from Jurassic World VelociCoaster: our concrete fences and load station overlook are direct lifts from the Indominus Rex paddock seen in the films. Our iconic ride vehicle looks right at home next to the Gyrosphere attraction seen on screen."

As for the ride itself? Well, if you've ever wanted to feel weightless, you're in luck. The only thing is you're going to be catapulted 155 feet into the air at speeds of up to 70mph – while avoiding a raptor pack – to achieve it. You're also going to find yourself in 360-degree inversions – dangling you inches above the lagoon – as well as an inverted stall that spans over 100 feet and a plummet down a severe 80-degree drop while you hurtle along 4,700 feet of track. Terrifying? Yes. Brilliant and exhilarating? Oh hell yes. ●

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SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA

The Mexican-Canadian author talks about reinventing HG Wells

Words by Jonathan Wright // Photography by Martin Dec

SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA TOYED WITH THE idea of doing a novel that riffed on HG Wells's SF mad-scientist urtext *The Island Of Dr Moreau* for quite some time before her own book came into focus. The problem, she realised, was Wells's setting: a remote island in the Pacific.

"When I figured that I could move the action to Mexico in the 19th century, that's when everything made sense," she says. "And that's when I was able to move forward. I had a location and a time period, specificity that helped me be able to handle the material."

The result is *The Daughter Of Dr Moreau*. It's a novel that takes many of the familiar elements of Wells's work, like Moreau's creation of human-like hybrid beings, yet brings a different sensibility to the story. "It's not a pastiche, it's not intended to be a reproduction of Wells," she says of a book that deals with class, colonialism, sexism and race.

Nevertheless, it's most definitely an SF novel, something Moreno-Garcia is at pains to emphasise. She's wary when SFX suggests there's a Gothic element. "The trouble for me is that if I say Gothic, people sometimes expect certain things naturally – for example, ghosts," she says. "I had this happen with *Mexican Gothic*, where some people told me they liked the novel but they were unhappy it had a science fiction element." Such are the difficulties when navigating reader expectations and questions of genre.

RACE-RELATED

The book's perspective is split between two characters: Moreau's daughter, Carlota, who dreams of travel, romance and escape, someone "learning about the world", and his assistant, alcoholic Montgomery, "somebody who has seen too much of the world".

The duo's lives in an isolated compound are turned upside down when Eduardo Lizalde, the son of Moreau's rich backer, visits unexpectedly. He's an entitled, unpleasant young man, the product of a specific point and place in Mexican history. Located in the south-east, close to modern-day Belize and Guatemala, the Yucatán peninsula was, in the second half of the 19th century, a disputed area.

It was also a region where landowners, some descended from Europeans, operated an abusive system of bonded labour, a "very violent and tense moment in time", during which the indigenous Maya staged a rebellion. To talk about this period without talking about race and class, says Moreno-Garcia, would be "like talking about the 19th century US South without talking about race and class".

BIODATA

From
Baja California,
Mexico

Greatest Hits
Mexican Gothic
(2020), a horror
tale involving
fungus that has a
dangerously
symbiotic
relationship
with humans, made the
bestseller lists.
Demonstrating
her versatility,
Velvet Was The
Night was a noir
thriller.

Random Fact
The book
Moreno-Garcia
has re-read the
most is Edith
Wharton's *The*
Age Of Innocence,
she owns a
pocket copy.



Today, she adds, the legacy of colonialism is still felt in Mexico. For all that the *mestizo*, someone descended from European and indigenous people, is a national ideal, what happens if you don't fit that ideal? Growing up, Moreno-Garcia says, she was told she looked "too ethnic". Watch Mexican soap operas "and everybody looks really, really white", as if this is an unstated ideal. "Mexican society is still grappling, sometimes really unsuccessfully, with its colonial legacy," she says.

Her perspective on her home country was shaped by an unusual childhood. Her parents were radio journalists, and her childhood was "bohemian" in comparison to many of her friends. "It was feast or famine. Sometimes there was no money because there was no work, but we had a lot of cultural and educational richness." There was always music in the home, she says – "my father's thing" – and always books, including the horror novels her mother loved.

HOLIDAY READING

Some of these were bought from a bookshop in Mexico City. It had an outlet section, where the family's approach was to fill a bag with an eclectic selection of remaindered books, which then got piled around the house. "Vacations are for the bourgeoisie," her father would say when there wasn't the money to take one. "We have books."

As an adult, Moreno-Garcia emigrated to Canada, partly because she thought there would be better opportunities and partly "to see another place and live in another place". In a curious way, her adopted country reminds her of Baja California, where she was born, a region of Mexico immediately south of California. It was "an untamed place" where you could suddenly find yourself completely alone – not unlike British Columbia, where she now lives.

"Canada kind of floats between spaces," she says. "That's what I probably enjoy about it. What I liked about growing up around the border was that it was a space between spaces. Always, the border indicates exactly that, a liminal space where things meet, and that's where I grew up."

It was there she began writing seriously, in English, which she learnt as a child, partly from reading Stephen King. It was often a struggle to get published and make money, but all that changed when *Mexican Gothic* became a bestseller and she could quit her day job – freeing up time to explore the liminal spaces her imagination conjures up. ●

The Daughter Of Dr Moreau is published by Jo Fletcher Books on 19 July.

“What I liked
about growing up
around the border
was that it was a
space between
spaces”





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AUG
2022

edited by Ian Berriman

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Gorr blimey!

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THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER

Gods And Funsters



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

12A | 119 minutes

▶ Director Taika Waititi

▶ Cast Chris Hemsworth, Christian Bale, Natalie Portman, Tessa Thompson, Russell Crowe, Taika Waititi

● **With *Love And Thunder*, Thor** becomes the first MCU superhero to headline four movies. Although with Taika Waititi back on writer/director/supporting actor duties after re-energising the subfranchise so magnificently with *Thor: Ragnarok*, this feels as much like *Ragnarok 2* as *Thor 4*.

One thing it definitely isn't – some may be disappointed to hear after the set-up in *Avengers: Endgame* – is *Guardians Of The Galaxy Volume 2.5: Now That's What I Call A Marvel Team-Up*. The Guardians' appearance here is pretty much an extended cameo played resolutely for laughs, as Thor regains his mojo and God bod (though perhaps not his path in life).

When a new god-murdering Big Bad sets his sights on New Asgard (now a thriving tourist destination), Thor leaves Star Lord and co, and heads off with Korg (and some screaming space goats he's picked up along the way) to hammer ass. All to a Guns N' Roses-drenched soundtrack (*Ragnarok* and roll!), whose songs become more touchingly relevant as the movie goes on.

Thor finds Asgard already defended... by another Thor. His old flame Jane Foster now wields Mjolnir. But between them they cannot stop Gorr the God Butcher from trapping all the Asgardian kids in a shadow realm. So Thor,

Thor, Valkyrie, Korg and the screaming goats go on an epic quest to seek out other gods (any denomination, they're not picky) to help them defeat Gorr – though maybe Zeus might be more help than the God of Dumplings...

Coming after *Ragnarok*, *Love And Thunder* carries a huge weight of expectation, and the good news is that 99% of what's on-screen is massively entertaining, achingly witty and full of all the weirdly inventive imagery you'd expect from Taika Waititi.

It's also rammed with Easter eggs, fan-pleasing character cameos (especially if you stay for the end credits) and running gags, including Stormbreaker's hissy fit about Thor trying to woo Mjolnir back, and Jane's search for a cringeworthy catchphrase. Natalie Portman is huge fun as the female Thor, Tessa Thompson's Valkyrie forms a delightfully unexpected double act with Korg, the production design is stunning, and the action sequences have a fresh, almost *Looney Tunes* feel that suits the tone.

Best of all though, is Christian Bale's Gorr: by quite some distance the most fully-formed MCU villain yet (well, if you discount Scarlet Witch, who had multiple films and a TV series to develop her character). At odds with the goofiness of much of the film,

“The good news is that 99% of what's on-screen is massively entertaining”



Nat and Chris: may the Thors be with you... always.

Gorr is played with a grim intensity befitting his creepy shadow powers. It's a shame he doesn't get more screen time, as some of his issues with the gods raise some really interesting questions, but his verbal sparring with Thor is kept to a minimum, maybe because Waititi's vision of Thor doesn't strike you as someone who indulges in ethical debate too often.

And that's indicative of the main problem with the film (well, after

Zeus's naff, plasticky lightning weapon): it presses all the right buttons, but you can't help feeling there were other, less predictable, buttons it could have pressed. The Guardians section in particular is a blast, sure, but feels perfunctory and one-note, a bit of necessary housekeeping that makes Star Lord and co come across almost as *The Simpsons* guest star versions of themselves. It's good to see Jane in the centre of the action, but from her very first scene the



character's fate is written through her like a stick of Blackpool rock. Hemsworth's Thor is now pretty much the noble dimwit throughout, and highly watchable as that is, it's preventing Thor from growing as a character (beyond baby steps). Aside from Gorr, the film seems wary of not playing everything safe.

Not that there aren't some subtle touches to enjoy. Waititi – the film's storyteller – also plays Korg, who at various times tells

very loose stories of Thor's antics to the kids. Later, when the kids are kidnapped, Gorr gives the kids a very different kind of bedtime story. So as well as being a story of love and thunder, this is a story about how we – and, indeed, filmmakers – interpret legends. Though maybe that's getting a little deep for a film that majors on screaming goats... **Dave Karger**

I The young Thor seen in a montage sequence is played by Chris Hemsworth's son, Tristan Hemsworth.



MINIONS: THE RISE OF GRU

Despicable We

★★★★☆

▶ RELEASED OUT NOW!

U 88 minutes

▶ Directors Kyle Balda, Brad Ableson, Jonathan del Val

▶ Cast Steve Carell, Taraji P. Henson, Michelle Yeoh, Alan Arkin

● **The conspicuously limited** screen time the Minions were afforded in the third *Despicable Me* film suggested they were almost being punished for the success of their 2015 standalone. This '70s-set follow-up puts the little yellow henchpersons back in the spotlight. Yet it's one they pointedly have to share with Steve Carell's Gru, (re)incarnated here as a precocious 12-year-old keen to take his first steps in the world of super-villainy.

His dream is to join the Vicious Six, a swaggering sextet of evil-doers who, having just ousted the ageing Wild Knuckles (Alan Arkin) from their ranks, have a vacancy. When Gru turns up for an interview, alas, he's laughed out of the room by group leader Belle

Bottom (Taraji P. Henson), prompting him to take off with the magic medallion she needs to pull off her latest heist.

Keeping up so far? Good, because it's not long before the Minions have messed things up by mislaying this all-important Zodiac Stone. An entertaining if complicated caper ensues that juxtaposes the Minions' comedic misadventures – commandeering a plane bound for San Francisco, learning kung-fu skills from Michelle Yeoh's acupuncturist – with a more sentimental plot thread built on the grandfatherly bond Gru forms with Arkin's crotchety veteran.

What you're basically getting, then, is a prequel-sequel that tries to advance both Gru and Minions' storylines. The end result isn't big enough for both of them, yet still boasts enough visually inventive hi-jinks to amuse the franchise's youthful fanbase. **Neil Smith**

I Look out for a 1961 issue of *Mad*. Sent to press before the election results, it had covers congratulating Kennedy and Nixon.

CINEMA



Why take revenge? Because she's worth it.

SHE WILL Victoria's Secret

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** 22 JULY

15 | 95 minutes

▶ **Director** Charlotte Colbert

▶ **Cast** Alice Krige, Kota Eberhardt, Malcolm McDowell, Rupert Everett

◀ **We aren't short on horror** films influenced by #MeToo recently, but Charlotte Colbert's feature debut still stands out from the crowd as a visceral, hypnotic tale of vengeance.

Alice Krige plays Victoria, an actress on an upmarket healing retreat. Following a double mastectomy, she's accompanied by her nurse Desi (Kota Eberhardt), but at the retreat older wounds resurface, and the spirits of the witches burned at the site imbue Victoria with the ability to seek some long overdue revenge.

No one could accuse the script of subtlety, but the imagery and

performances elevate it. Blunt exposition is compensated for by gorgeous cathartic dream sequences, through filth, blood and fury. Colbert's background as a multimedia artist stands her in good stead, with some impressively elegant and bewitching sequences.

Malcolm McDowell and Rupert Everett are stuck with rather two-dimensional roles, as villain and comic relief respectively, but the heart of the film lies with the bond that forms between Desi and Victoria, which both actresses sell with aplomb. It's not hard to see why Dario Argento, who "presents" the film and was an executive producer, had faith in Colbert's abilities.

Lella Laiff

I Charlotte Colbert's half-siblings include Conservative peer Zac Goldsmith and journalist/TV producer Gemma Khan.

LIGHTYEAR Ranger Things

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED** OUT NOW!

PG | 107 minutes

▶ **Director** Angus MacLane

▶ **Cast** Chris Evans, Keke Palmer, Peter Sohn, Tika Waiiti

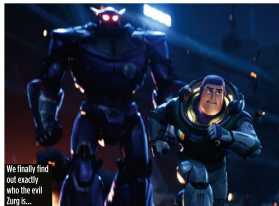
◀ **It's now a matter of legend** that, back in 1995, a kid named Andy received a Buzz Lightyear action figure for his birthday. This *Toy Story* spin-off imagines the movie that made him fall in love with Star Command's finest in the first place, but there's a problem with its uber-meta premise: it's hard to believe that such a run-of-the-mill sci-fi adventure could be any eight-year-old's favourite film.

Neither vintage space opera nor vintage Pixar, *Lightyear* never quite feels worthy of the original *Space Ranger*. This Buzz (voiced by Chris Evans rather than Tim

Allen) spends most of the running time trying to make amends for the error that leaves 1,200 shipmates stranded on a hostile alien world, and there's precious little of the entertaining, all-action bravado that made his plastic counterpart such a welcome addition to Andy's playroom.

That's not to say *Lightyear* is short on ambition. The opening act owes more to *Interstellar* than *Star Wars*, as a series of sub-light speed test flights cause Buzz to jump forward in time; an early montage where he watches his best friend age in four-year increments almost matches *Up*'s opening scenes for sheer emotional power.

The production design is also a triumph, from the spectacular planets to CG spaceships built with the weighty, tactile feel of physical models. Unfortunately,



We finally find out exactly who the evil Zurg is...

Lightyear's numerous nods to other, better movies – whether *Aliens*, 2001's *A Space Odyssey* or the *Toy Story* films – only serve to highlight the fact that it's a little, well, dull. And with the exception of robot cat sidekick Sox (voiced by regular Pixar writer/director Peter Sohn), none of Buzz's new sidekicks are as memorable as the likes of Woody, Jessie or Rex.

On the occasions *Lightyear*'s setpieces do hit the mark, you get a hint of the movie it could have been. But there's no denying that the action figure Buzz is a lot more fun than his "live action" counterpart – whether he's a flying toy or not. **Richard Edwards**

I To help establish a chunky aesthetic, director Angus MacLane "sketched" early spaceship designs in Lego.



THE BLACK PHONE

Dial M For Murdered

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

IS | 103 minutes

▶ Director Scott Derrickson

▶ Cast Ethan Hawke, Mason Thames, Jeremy Davies, Madeleine McGraw

© **The number of films and TV shows based on works by Stephen King runs into scores, if not hundreds.** His son Joe Hill, in contrast, has barely a handful on his CV, with only Daniel Radcliffe's 13 vehicle *Horns* making much of an impression.

If *The Black Phone* is anything to go by, though, Hill's blower may soon be ringing off the hook.

Adapted from a short story that featured in his 2005 collection *20th Century Ghosts*, this smart, taut and scary chiller builds on a killer premise ('70s kid gets abducted by neighbourhood child-slaver) by adding a supernatural bonus (basement

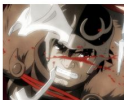
“This smart, taut and scary chiller builds on a killer premise”

prison comes with phone that connects kid to murderer's earlier victims). Throw in a rare bad guy turn from Ethan Hawke and *Doctor Strange* director Scott Derrickson's return to his *Sinister* horror roots becomes something even rarer: a genre film with a brain, a pulse and a surprising amount of heart.

The Grabber from Hill's original was a corpulent slob. Hawke's, though, is truly the stuff of nightmares, the Tom Savini-designed masks he uses to hide his boyish features gifting him multiple personas with which to torment Mason Thames's powerless yet resourceful Finney.

It's a terrific embellishment, as is Derrickson's decision (with co-writer C Robert Carrigall) to expand the role of Finney's psychic sister Gwen. Feistily played by Madeleine McGraw, she's a force for good with the mouth of a sailor – something the cops discover when they dare to question her. Consider this a ringing endorsement. **Neil Smith**

Before his kidnapping, Finney is seen watching the bloody bathtub scene from William Castle's 1959 horror *The Tingler*.



THE DEER KING

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 27 JULY**

IS | 113 minutes

▶ Directors Masashi Ando,

Masayuki Miyaji

▶ Cast Shinichi Tsutsumi,

Hisui Kimura, Ryoma Takeuchi,

Anne Watanabe

© **Masashi Ando makes his directorial debut** alongside Masayuki Miyaji with this anime tale of warring nations, viruses and rebellions. Ando worked as an animator for Hayao Miyazaki, Satoshi Kon, and Isao Takahata, so hopes were high for his first feature.

Adapted from the fantasy novels of Nahoko Uehashi, *The Deer King* might have worked better as a series, however. Even with an abundance of exposition to establish the conflict between the Empire of Zol and the conquered kingdom of Aquafa, there are so many competing ideas that there's no room for character depth.

The story's hero is the Aquafese ex-soldier Van, who rescues an infant girl, Yuna, when the salt mine where Van is a slave is attacked by wolves carrying a deadly plague. Van proves immune to the virus, which attracts the attention of Holsalle, a Zolian physician searching for a cure.

Van is a man of precious few words, and too taciturn for a protagonist. The worldbuilding is inconsistent, with bows and spears alongside Zeppelins and hypodermic needles. The big showdown between the Aquafese rebels and the Zol army is terribly conceived, and the script becomes increasingly impetuous. Despite excellent production values, the result is a cluttered mess.

David West



KURT VONNEGUT: UNSTUCK IN TIME

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 22 JULY**

(also VOD)

TBC | 126 minutes

▶ Directors Robert Weide, Don Argott

© **Early on, director Robert**

Weide admits he's not keen on documentaries where the filmmaker puts themselves in the film: "Who cares?" If you agree, the degree to which he is foregrounded may occasion an eye-roll – but the approach does, eventually, justify itself.

Weide began filming with the *Slaughterhouse-Five* author in 1988, reuniting many times before Vonnegut's death in 2007. What with one thing and another – including Weide's success directing *Curb Your Enthusiasm* – the project kept being shelved. The wealth of material – Vonnegut sent Weide a VHS of his every public speaking engagement – was surely a factor, and adds to the richness of the end result.

Weide's camera follows Vonnegut as he visits key sites like his childhood home and high school, cutting between chat show clips, home movies, answer-machine messages and interviews with family. Though the author mostly comes across as mischievous good company – his infectious laughter recurs – this is no hagiography; his children recall an unengaged, often "scary" father figure.

Barring the odd return to a key image – a pretty linear chronological account of a life. The fact that the filmmaker/subject relationship evolved into a loving cross-generational friendship infuses it with added poignancy. **Ian Bertram**



"Souze me mate, can you spare 20p for a coffee?"

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

-  Obi-Wan tries to make contact with Qui-Gon Jinn through the Force.
-  An Inquisitor gives a spiny double-ended lightsaber a whirl.
-  Revs gets a grilling from Vader or another Inquisitor.
-  We catch a glimpse of Darth Vader without his helmet.
-  Obi-Wan makes a reference to Luke and Leia's parents.
-  A familiar theme from John Williams's *Star Wars* scores makes an appearance.
-  There's a flashback to the Jedi Temple during Order 66.



OBI-WAN KENOBI

The Twin Dilemma

★★★★★

UK/US Disney+, streaming now

► Showrunner Joby Harold

► Cast Ewan McGregor, Hayden

Christensen, Moses Ingram,

Vivien Lyra Blair

EPISODES 100/100

Han Solo was famously sceptical about holkey religions and ancient weapons, but when it comes to *Star Wars* spin-offs, there's no question Obi-Wan Kenobi has the upper hand. While this show has plenty in common with the largely forgettable *Solo* – not least the time period in which it's set – the series also manages to avoid the pitfalls of telling you things you never needed to know. Thankfully, the origins of Obi-Wan's surname remain shrouded in mystery...

This is a story of redemption, both for the eponymous hero, and for the way he and former apprentice Anakin Skywalker were portrayed in the prequel trilogy. Ewan McGregor's nuanced performance here is by some distance the best he's ever given in that Jedi beige, and the emotionally bruised Ben Kenobi we meet on Tatooine is very different from both the all-action Jedi of the prequels and the wise old man played by Alec Guinness.

A decade on from that fateful duel with Anakin Skywalker, the Empire are tightening their grip on the galaxy – Darth Vader and his Inquisitors have ensured the Jedi are an endangered species, and the Rebels are yet to form an Alliance of any note. Obi-Wan

himself has turned his back on the Force, living a lonely life packing meat, while keeping a watchful (but distant) eye on the young Luke Skywalker.

EPISODE ONE SPOILER AHEAD! Arguably the show's smartest move, however, is that the other Skywalker twin has the more significant role to play. Luring Kenobi out of his desert-based midlife crisis was always going to require a fairly seismic event, and the kidnapping of a certain young princess from Alderaan is big enough to fit the bill. Leia Organa (Vivien Lyra Blair) becomes the show's Baby Yoda, both a story-driving MacGuffin and an engaging (if precocious) foil capable of reawakening the hero's purpose.

But the kid isn't the only one with a vested interest in Kenobi coming out of hiding. Vader is still carrying a serious grudge after being chagrined on Mustafar, and the show's as much about his lust for revenge as Old Ben's return. That their reunion lives up to the hype owes as much to their bitter spoken exchanges as their prowess with a lightsaber, and – much like the Sith Lord's cameo in *Rogue One* – the series relishes the opportunity to show Vader at the height of his powers as the Emperor's enforcer-in-chief.

There are times when *Obi-Wan Kenobi* frustrates, most notably when the story relies too heavily on characters making schoolboy errors, or stretches existing canon close to breaking point. But if the measure of a prequel's success is whether it enhances your understanding of a character, then the show is a triumph, more *Better Call Saul* than *Solo*. **Richard Edwards**

i The spice dealer Obi-Wan meets on Dautu in episode two is played by Ewan McGregor's daughter, Esther Rose.

THE BABY

Sleepless nights ahead

★★★★★

UK Sky Atlantic, Thursdays/

streaming on Now

US HBO, streaming now

▶ Creators Lucy Gayer,

Sian Robins-Grace

▶ Cast Michelle de Swarte, Amira

Ghazalla, Amber Grappo, Isy Suttie

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 How scary can one baby be? Sky's new horror series will soon convince you that the answer is: very.

38-year-old Tash (Michelle de Swarte) is single and child-free, but as more and more of her friends settle down and start spawning, she worries that babies will ruin her life.

Then, through an improbable and splatery sequence of events, she finds herself having to look after one herself, and the life-ruining begins in earnest.

Like 2016's psycho-slasher *Prevenge*, *The Baby* is a chilling exploration of how having (or not having) a baby can completely define a woman in the eyes of the world. To Tash's friend Rita (Isy Suttie), she's worryingly unstable; to her sister Bobbi (Amber Grappo) she's callous and ungrateful; and to some thoughtless police officers, she's a woman, so why wouldn't she want to care for some random infant?

As the baby's true origins are slowly revealed, the horrors done to women in the name of innocent children come into blood-

“The script simmers with righteous indignation”

“He wants to know, ‘What you looking at?’”



spattered focus. Lucy Gayer and Sian Robins-Grace's script simmers with righteous indignation, and is aggressively sweaty and unflinchingly violent. (One scene in particular, featuring kids from a hippie commune, seems likely to prompt a few calls to Ofcom.)

And yet, in the end, the showrunners find a way to give all of their characters some measure

of peace, even happiness. That's no mean feat, considering the scale of the horrors that came before, but likeable performances across the board (well, except for the baby...) mean that anything less than a happy ending would've been truly horrifying.

Sarah Dobbs

I The show's uncanny baby was actually played by a pair of twins – Abbie and Arthur – who were scouted on Instagram.

THE BOYS Season Three

Sick bags at the ready!

★★★★★

UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

▶ Showrunner Eric Kripke

▶ Cast Antony Starr, Erin Moriarty,

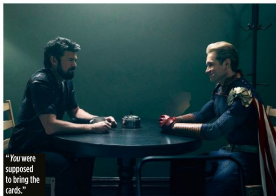
Jack Quaid, Laz Alonso

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 “Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should,” says Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park*, and it’s a sentiment that can also be applied to the writers of *The Boys’* latest season. It takes a mere 10 minutes for something to happen so brain-searingly, soul-shakingly gross that our nightmares will be haunted for years... but it’s also part of the reason why *The Boys* is one of the most memorable fun shows on TV. Sometimes, Jeff, people really, really should.

This season kicks off with psycho Homelander (Antony

Starr) fighting to redeem his tarnished public image after the world has discovered that he was dating a Nazi. Meanwhile, Hughie (Jack Quaid) and Billy (Karl Urban) have joined forces with an official government agency tasked with bringing naughty superheroes to justice; naturally, it’s not long before everything goes tits up. (On the subject of tits, there are far fewer on display this year than there are male buttocks and dong – make of that what you will.)

While the ensemble cast are all on fine form, season three’s MVPs are Kimiko (Karen Fukuhara) and Frenchie (Tomer Capone), whose love story is played out in charming song and dance routines, while *Supernatural*’s Jensen Ackles has an almost worrying amount of fun playing



“You were supposed to bring the cards.”

superpowered asshole Soldier Boy. His arrival might explain why Queen Maeve (Dominique McElligott) is annoyingly sidelined – by the time she gets something to do, you’ve almost forgotten she exists – but the bonkers antics of A-Train and The Deep are entertaining enough to ease that hurt.

Somehow, despite a few repetitive themes (most of them

involving frankly astonishing amounts of gore), *The Boys* remains as fresh, funny and gut-wrenchingly explosive – literally – as ever. It may make you feel nauseated, but it will also make you laugh. Long may our retching continue.

Jayne Nelson

I One of Soldier Boy’s procedures took place on 24 January – also the birthday of Dean Winchester in *Supernatural*.



George hasn't quite got the hang of using a gun. Bless.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

George shoots someone dead (that he hasn't killed before).

Someone is called a dickhead.

People have a casual conversation in the middle of a shoot-out/car chase.

We see George's clock as it ticks past midnight onto 1 July.



There's a flashback to how someone was recruited.

George somehow takes a flight carrying an object he'd never get past security.

A female character makes a *Indietronica*-esque remark.

THE LAZARUS PROJECT Season One

Stuck On Repeat

★★★★★

UK Sky Max, Wednesdays; streaming on NOW

► Creator Joe Barton

► Cast Paapa Essiedu, Anjali Mohindra, Rudi Dharmalingam, Charly Clive, Caroline Quentin, Tom Burke

EPISODES 10x1-10x10 They could have spun a Glen A Larson production from this show's premise: a clandestine organisation which works to prevent extinction events but, when they fail, can reset time to a 1 July "checkpoint" and just try again. It's easy to imagine an '80s apocalypse-of-the-week show with the team foiling a different terrorist or mad scientist each episode. There would have been speedboat chases, and no doubt leather blousons.

The 2022 version is very different. This is a show which repeatedly brings the apocalypse, but whose focus is resolutely on the personal: on the team members themselves. Even the Big Bad is a former workmate. You soon realise that this was the right choice, because the scale of a nuclear explosion is almost inconceivable, whereas losing someone you love... well, that can be truly world-ending.

Paapa Essiedu plays George, an app developer who learns that he's one of the few "mutants" with the natural ability to retain memories of the timeline undone whenever the world jumps back. Recruited by the Lazarus Project, he's way out of his depth. When tragedy strikes, he has a choice: deal with

it and move on, or engineer a situation that will force his colleagues to hit the reset button.

The way George chaotically stumbles through situations may have you shouting at the screen. He's possibly the world's worst liar, and at times frustratingly short on initiative. But there's also something oddly charming about his everyman incompetence.

It's just one means by which the show is firmly grounded. The other is the dialogue, which crackles with sardonic quips. It's akin to a Bond movie where M16 all converse like friends taking the piss down the pub. Not all the cast have the chops required to make this laconic tone feel naturalistic, but mostly it works well.

Darkly humorous, it's a globe-trotting show (although mostly to gritty corners that can be easily realised in Bristol...) with

plenty of well-mounted action and some killer twists – particularly in the last two episodes. But the best thing about it is the way creator Joe Barton thinks through the emotional ramifications. What would it mean if your life was on the up, but the world was reset? What if it meant revisiting pain, or losing out on joy? Would it be easier to kill people if you knew it was reversible?

There's a fair amount you can nitpick: Lazarus base security is laughable, for one thing, while antagonist Rebrov's motivation makes sense, but his actual plans are sketchy. But you can let all that slide, as it's a rare show which can pose such dark questions while still having such a huge amount of fun. **Ian Berriman**

► The series was put back while references to Ukraine were removed. Originally, the "Big Boy" nuke was stolen there.

HALO Season One

This is Spartans!

★★★★★

UK Paramount+, Wednesdays
US Paramount+, streaming now
▶ Showrunners Steven Kane, Kyle Killen
▶ Cast Pablo Schreiber, Natasha
McElhone, Olive Gray, Charlie Murphy,
Kate Kennedy

EPISODES 1.01-1.09 This may not be the Master Chief you're looking for, and that's a good thing. The TV series of *Halo* takes the iconic hero figure and injects him with a level of humanity previously unseen in the videogames upon which it's based.

Here, Master Chief is John – a human inside a suit that probably costs more than a fighter jet – and Pablo Schreiber plays him with the appropriate mix of gravitas and honour, along with a frustrated desperation to uncover the truth behind his creation.

The showrunners have a clear understanding of the darker themes at play in the franchise, and weave them throughout the episodes in a manner that may surprise fans of the games. We learn of the morally repugnant creation of the iconic supersoldiers, and the purported good guys' obsession with taking natural resources on their constituents' planets. This is a world marred by the choices of humankind – it's not simply about humans vs ugly, evil aliens, but also humans taking each other on in a battle for the soul of humanity.

While the writing choices and plot devices may occasionally be questionable, and the special effects can teeter into noughties *Doctor Who* territory, this is a solid stab at adapting a beloved videogame series. It's certainly



Master Chief's limo-dancing class was very popular.

a controversial one – Schreiber spends a lot of his time as Master Chief helmetless (something that never happens in the games), and there's a romance subplot that had some fans reeling, but there's a boldness to taking such well-known source material and giving us something wholly unique.

And whenever the series falters, it's held up by fantastic acting from Schreiber, Natasha

McElhone as the villainous Dr Catherine Halsey, Olive Gray as her daughter Miranda Keyes, and Kate Kennedy as Spartan soldier Kai. There are some great performances in this show that are definitely worth checking out, even if you're unsure about its take on the hero. **Alysia Mercante**

I Alex Garland wrote a *Halo* film circa 2004. Neil Blomkamp was attached to direct before the deal fell apart.

THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY Season Three

Apocalypse now... again

★★★★★

UK/US Netflix, streaming now
▶ Showrunner Steve Blackman
▶ Cast Elliot Page, Tom Hopper, Emmy
Raver-Lampman, David Castaneda

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 The *Umbrella Academy* siblings have been bouncing around in time and space, fighting apocalypse after apocalypse, for so long now that it's hard to remember what their original timeline looked like. Thankfully, this year they stay firmly in one place (well, more or less). That place, however, is inhabited by another group of siblings called the Sparrow Academy, and it isn't long before they're at each other's throats.

The show's third year is as sharp and funny as ever, with random song-and-dance numbers and demented fight scenes vying with genuinely stunning effects working to blow our socks off.

Most commendably, characters get to evolve: goody-two-shoes Allison (Emmy Raver-Lampman) is so distraught that her daughter doesn't exist in this timeline that she dances with the Dark Side, while miseryguts Luther (Tom Hopper) falls in love and becomes ecclesiastically happy.

“The third year is as sharp and funny as ever”



“Has one of us changed size, or something?”

Meanwhile, Diego (David Castaneda) gets to reunite, in strange circumstances, with the bonkers Lila (Ritu Arya, who deserves a spin-off of her own), and Vanya becomes Viktor in an exquisitely underplayed storyline reflecting the actor's real-life transition to Elliot Page.

Disappointingly, Aidan Gallagher's Five isn't given much room to grow, while a subplot

involving Klaus's powers feels forced. The tendency for characters to talk endlessly about their feelings while the world is ending a few feet away is rather irritating, too. But these are small niggles about a show that delights in playing with our expectations.

Jayne Nelson

I Among the wallpapers in the show's Hotel Oblivion is the iconic carpet design from *The Shining* (but in different colours).



"Shall I fall over to distract them?" "God no, Ian."

Kim Newman and *Who* writers/fans Mark Gatiss and Robert Shearman. Favouring observational chat over hard data, and offering insights into writing *Daleks* for the new series, these are satisfyingly geeky tracks, affectionate but not overly reverential. Gatiss in particular has fun, hooting at the notion of a Dalek pen, referring to one sequence as "the poo scene", and observing that the *Thals* look like "the predatory homosexual ballet dancers I was warned about".

Each movie also gets a "The Dalek Legacy" featurette (16 minutes each) exploring the films' ongoing influence; interviewees include new series effects guy Mike Tucker, Dalek voice man Nick Briggs and an expert on the Dalek props.

The recurring impression, as you watch Tucker brandish his audio cassette recordings, or Briggs getting his ring modulator out to imitate Dalek dialogue, is of middle-aged men revealing their inner eight-year-olds – which is really rather sweet. For "balance", we get the views of someone who's never watched either film before – a predictably pointless exercise.

A rather dry piece on the restoration (11 minutes) should thrill those into chat about tramlines and wet-gates.

Carried over from previous releases are the solid 1995 DTV doc *Dalekmania* (57 minutes – included with both films), commentary on *Dr Who & The Daleks* by stars Jennie Linden and Roberta Tovey, short talking heads by Shepperton Studios expert Gareth Owen (eight minutes/four minutes), and a bit of Cribbins discussing *Daleks' Invasion* (four minutes). Plus: trailers; galleries.

Physical goodies for both Collector's Editions include a 42-page essay booklet, two posters (new and old art), five art cards of B&W stills, a collectable coin and 32-page previews of a forthcoming book on the films. Bear in mind that the no-thrills Steelbook editions will let you back about half as much. Ian Bertram

I Circa 1980, writer Milton Subotsky reworked a script for Guy Smith's *Invader From The Crabs* as a possible third *Who* film.

THE DALEK MOVIES

The Peter principal

RELEASED OUT NOW/18 JULY 1956/1966 | U | 4K Blu-ray (dual format)

Director Gordon Flemying

Cast Peter Cushing, Roberta Tovey, Roy Castle, Bernard Cribbins, Jennie Linden, Jill Curzon

Given how many Doctor

Who movies have stalled in development over the decades since, the speed with which *Amicus* got two into cinemas in the space of 14 months in the mid-'60s looks even more impressive. Adapting two of Terry Nation's TV serials, their recasting of the Doctor as a dotty human boffin may feel heretical, but only the most cold-hearted *Who* fan can fail to warm to these colourful adventures, so redolent of a lazy bank holiday afternoon.

Dr Who & The Daleks

★★★★ is the weaker entry. Commencing with a slide warning of "outdated attitudes" (presumably mild sexism, not the Daleks' genocidal aggression), it

transports the Doctor and co to the pepperpots' home world, where they're caught up in the Daleks' attempts to wipe out the pacifist *Thals*. Roy Castle's Norman Wisdom-esque pratfalling as the accident-prone Ian soon irritates. Some of Nation's adventure plotting feels like filler. The score compounds the feeling of a wearying plot. And with Cushing (then 51) faking a stooped old-man gait, the Doctor is rather too doddery. All the same, the Daleks look glorious en masse in Technicolor, and some of the alien planet sets are impressive considering the low budget.

Throwing viewers in at the deep end of a conquered future London, *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150AD* ★★★★★ is a superior effort in every way, boasting a grander scale, a frenetic jazzy score and a more palpable sense of threat. Cushing's character feels more nimble, both physically and mentally, and the supporting cast

“Only the most cold-hearted *Who* fan can fail to warm to these adventures”

(which includes the dependable likes of Bernard Cribbins, Philip Madoc and Andrew Keir) is terrific. With the human rebels' struggles echoing the French Resistance, it's a surprisingly gritty, at times grim affair. It even has moments of cool, as Ray Brooks's hip young rebel dispatches zombified Robo-Men using his knife, shotgun and unshakable sang-froid. It's a step up from both the previous film and the sluggish TV version, and a solid British sci-fi movie in its own right.

Extras The bonuses for both films ★★★★★ include new-to-the-UK 2020 commentaries featuring

OKJA

Pig tale



★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 18 JULY

2017 15 Blu-ray

Director Bong Joon-ho

Cast Ahn Seo-hyun, Tilda Swinton, Paul Dano, Jake Gyllenhaal

BLU-RAY DEBUT Five years after its release, this modern fable about the bond between a child and a giant pig remains as heart-wrenching as ever.

The Mirando Corporation has created a "super pig" that could end world hunger. Unlike the young Mija, who's helped raise one of the pigs in South Korea, they see the genetically-modified swine as cash cows to be pumped for meat and money. What follows is a cutting commentary on the institutionalised abuse of animals, the two-faced nature of companies that use cruelty-free narratives as

marketing tools, and how society is happy to treat some species as pets while putting others on the dinner table.

At the film's heart, however, is a love story between a little girl, beautifully played by 12-year-old Ahn Seo-hyun, and the sister she sees in Okja. It's a spot of purity amongst all the blood.

Extras This Criterion Collection edition comes with a lot of special features. One highlight is a 30-minute conversation between director Bong Joon-ho and

“A corporation has created a ‘super pig’ that could end world hunger”

South Korea is so advanced that people can levitate.



producer Dooho Choi, which dives into the making of the film and their shocking visit to a Colorado slaughterhouse where 5,000 cows were killed each day. Another's an interview with the production designer and the costume designers (20 minutes) about the unique challenge of making a film that spans the Korean countryside, Seoul and New York. There's plenty more, including: new

interviews with Ahn Seo-hyun and co-star Byun Hee-bong (totalling 29 minutes); interviews with the cinematographer, visual effects supervisor and animation supervisor (totalling 25 minutes); video diaries (two minutes); trailers; a booklet including an essay. **Kimberley Ballard**

I Okja's design was based on manatees, hippos and pigs, while her soft expressions were inspired by puppies.

THE CURIOUS DR HUMPP

Medical malpractice

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 18 JULY

1970 18 Blu-ray

Director Emilio Vieyra

Cast Ricardo Balboa, Gloria Prat, Aldo Barbero, Susana Beltrán

BLU-RAY DEBUT This sexploitation sci-fi chaps up an already saucy Argentinean film, *La Venganza Del Sexo*, adding inserts of lovingly lesbian, orgiastic hippies, and a self-pleasuring nymphomaniac. Compared to what's freely available online nowadays (er, so we're told...) it's fairly tame, and a little saggy-bottomed.

The titular doctor, prone to declarations like "Sex dominates the world, and now I dominate

sex!" is conducting experiments on his horny kidnapped subjects: something about extracting bodily fluids to achieve immortality.

It's utterly ludicrous, which is less to do with the presence of a hairy-handed monster, a talking brain in a jar and "automaton" guards in matching knitwear than the general dimwittedness, from Humpp (who sends said monster to a pharmacy to pick up aphrodisiacs) to the clueless cops.

It's a cheapjack affair – as the boob-fondling drags on, your eyes may stray to damp marks on the ceiling – but entertainingly batshit. And Emilio Vieyra's original footage, with its heavy shadows and Dutch angles, is surprisingly



Ken and Barbie went through a rough patch.

well-crafted, at times achieving an eerie poetry akin to *Carnival Of Souls* or *Last Year At Marienbad*.

Extras This American Genre Film Archive release is remarkably crisp. *Basket Case* director Frank Henenlotter (a fan) provides a commentary; well-informed (he knows the brand of the nympho's massage device...), professionally executed and amusingly tongue in cheek, this is a model of how to do

it. *La Venganza Del Sexo* is also presented in full. Plus: five sleazy trailers for films like *Mundo Depravados* (11 minutes); 1950's "Tomb It May Concern" (11 minutes), a painfully unfunny comedy short set in an Egyptian princess's tomb, which wraps up with a burlesque dance. **Ian Bernstein**

I The US title curiously nods to *I Am Curious: Yellow*, a Swedish film which became notorious in 1969 for its sex scenes.



The Doctor meets his ultimate foe: Grade.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

The Doctor and Peri engage in bickering and petty point-scoring.

The Doctor rocks a new cut badge on his lapel.

A guest star gets mangled, stabbed or asphyxiated.



Sil gurgles like a particularly malevolent waste pipe.

The Doctor repeats – repeats? repeats?! – what someone else has just said.

There's a needless continuity reference.

Peri is tied-up and threatened with transformation.

DOCTOR WHO Season 22

Cancel culture

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1985 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Producer John Nathan-Turner

▶ Cast Colin Baker, Nicola Bryant, Anthony Ainley, Patrick Troughton

BLU-RAY DEBUT “I suddenly feel conspicuous”, declares Colin Baker, clad in the universe’s most attention-seeking costume. Pity that attention came from the highest echelons of the BBC. This run of adventures prompted uber-suit Michael Grade to cancel the series. Hurriedly rebranded as “hiatus” – it’s not a murder, it’s a holiday! – Grade’s intervention was ultimately a mortal wound.

It’s an odd, uneven season, intoxicated with blood and slime, its tone lurching from the macho,

Brit-gangster grit of “Attack Of The Cybermen” to the tinselly SF kitsch of “Timelash”. “Vengeance On Varos” is either a meta-commentary on TV violence or an outrage-seeking missile aimed squarely at Mary Whitehouse; “Mark Of The Rani” an altogether creakier historical romp. A delicious vein of black humour undercuts the stabby, acid-dunking nastiness, most notably in “The Two Doctors” and season highlight “Revelation Of The Daleks”, a witty, muscular tale that perfects the formula too late.

▶ **Extras** Three lengthy “In Conversation” interviews with the incisive Matthew Sweet; Michael Grade (53 minutes) is amusingly unrepentant, scotching fan-held conspiracy theories; Colin Baker

(84 minutes) reveals a more vulnerable figure behind his brash Doctor; Nicola Bryant (72 minutes) recalls the PR flub she was compelled to tell, making this the most fascinating of these chats.

All six stories get Gogglebox-style “Behind The Sofa” appraisals from *Who* royalty such as Baker, Peter Davison and Sylvester McCoy. “Location Location Location” (47 minutes) returns Baker and Bryant to where “Attack”, “Mark” and “Revelation” were shot. The affection between them is contagious; you end up wishing the show had capitalised on it. A new Making Of “The Two Doctors” (38 minutes) complements a ramshackle 2006 doc (41 minutes) where Bryant revisits the Spanish locations.

A new edit of a *Jim’ll Fix It* skit (eight minutes) snips Savile and has optional commentary; there’s also a new track for “Revelation” with Baker, Bryant and guest stars Terry Molloy and Alexei Sayle. Plus: studio footage (totalling 217 minutes) for “Vengeance”, “The Two Doctors”, “Timelash” and “Revelation”, and 28 minutes of mute film rushes from the latter; 1997 convention interviews with Baker, Jacqueline Pearce and John Nathan-Turner (70 minutes); optional new effects for “Timelash”; an extended “Revelation” part one; an audio interview with writer Robert Holmes (93 minutes); “Slipback”, the Douglas Adams-indebted 2005 radio yarn; and much more, including 11 archival clips from shows like *Breakfast Time* and *Points Of View*, and a blizzard of production paperwork. Bonuses from the DVD releases are also carried over. **Nick Setchfield**

I Former companion Jean Marsh was originally considered to play Chessene in “The Two Doctors”.



"...And they confiscated my T-shirt too!"

EXECUTIVE ORDER

Back to Africa

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | Download

▶ Directors Lázaro Ramos,

Flávia Lacerda

▶ Cast Alfred Enoch, Tais Araújo, Seu Jorge, Adriana Esteves

● **Near-future Brazil:** Antonio, a young lawyer, makes a grave miscalculation when he sues the government for reparations for the descendants of African slaves, with unforeseen consequences. The government sign an executive order to send all dark-skinned Brazilians back to Africa, and the authorities set about hunting them down like dogs, criminalising anyone deemed too black.

As political satire goes it ain't subtle, but the film explores the ramifications of its premise thoughtfully without skimping on thrills. The futuristic elements are

largely limited to more advanced computers and phones, used in an impressively sinister fashion – George Orwell would have likely approved of this vision of supposedly liberating technology turning into a fascist tool.

Alfred Enoch manages to shake off his *Harry Potter*/campy TV show roots and blossom into a striking leading man. More impressive still is Tais Araújo, who has the most gruelling character arc. Her performance is understated but heavy with emotional weight; she seems to tap into a primordial pain.

It all feels a little rushed – the scope of the story could have easily filled a miniseries – but this is an impressive and urgent piece of satire. **Leila Latif**

1 Enoch's dad, William Russell (60s Doctor Who companion Ian) also has a role. It was their first time working together.



RUBIKON

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | DVD/download

● **When humanity is** apparently wiped out in an ecological disaster, three astronauts on a space station argue over the morality of returning to Earth.

This efficiently made, low-budget sci-fi desperately wants to be *Moon*, but only occasionally shows flashes of the quirky character work and plot twists that made that film a cult classic. Mostly it feels overfamiliar and stodgy, though an epilogue suggests that if it'd started where it ends it could have been far more interesting.

● **Extras:** None. **Dave Golder**



MOLOCH

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 21 JULY**

2022 | TBC | SVOD

● **"SHUGGER"** This Dutch folk horror interweaves a mother whose family line seems to be cursed, an archaeological dig in a peat bog which keeps unearthing women with slit throats, and a local legend about a servant girl burned as a witch.

It's founded on well-drawn characters, and there are some neat touches, like using a school play to deliver exposition. Mostly favouring misty-woods atmosphere over jump scares, it should divert anyone who can't resist a ritual procession with animal masks. **Ian Berriman**



MONSTROUS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | TBC | Download

● **"Mr Sandman"** on the soundtrack; polka dot dresses; a powder-blue Chevrolet... this indie mystery's vision of the '50s is suspiciously immaculate.

Christina Ricci's mother relocates to California with her son. Then a slinky lake monster keeps invading the house. How very *Black Lagoon*. You'll soon be calculating the odds on a VR reality – it'd explain the obvious day-for-night – and playing Guess The Metaphor. When the reveal comes, it feels rather familiar. Still, you do get to enjoy Ricci rocking an array of fabulous frocks. **Ian Berriman**



ON THE 3RD DAY

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2021 | TBC | SVOD

● **"SHUGGER"** While fleeing her husband with her son, a traumatised mother crashes her car into a religious fanatic and wakes three days later with no memory of what happened.

Under hypnosis, a disturbing truth emerges... or, it might, if this Argentinian chiller hadn't been badly dubbed into English and smothered underneath an obnoxiously screaming score. Robbed of emotional impact, it becomes dully generic – it's flatpack horror, alarmingly wobbly under stress. A risible post-credits sting sends it all tumbling down. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE NORTHMAN

Axe to grind

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 18 JULY**

(download out now)

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K, standard), DVD | download

▶ Director Robert Eggers

▶ Cast Alexander Skarsgård, Anya Taylor-Joy, Nicole Kidman, Claes Bang

☉ **Vengeance is a dish served cold, muddy and brutal** in Robert Eggers's latest, but no one should really be shocked by that given that this is a Viking saga drawn from myth by the man behind *The Witch* and *The Lighthouse*.

Sticking with period drama, the director goes all-in on phantasmagorical imagery, bodies being horrendously sliced into and long meditations on fate. This is the story of Amleth (as the name hints, one that inspired Shakespeare to write *Hamlet*),

who after seeing his pops (Ethan Hawke's King Aurvandil War-Raven) slaughtered and his mother Queen Gudrún (Nicole Kidman) spirited away by his uncle (Claes Bang's calculating Fjölfnir), swears bloody vengeance. Cut to 20 years later and Amleth is Alexander Skarsgård's ripped warrior, slathered in the blood of his enemies, and plotting a way to get inside Fjölfnir's camp to make it happen.

Eggers too often meanders when he should speed up, with the obsession with details detracting from the central story, and some of the side trips having the feeling of indulgences that could have been sliced out at the script stage. Yet there's something to be said for the filmmaker's commitment to weird, vicious and vivid storytelling, with scenes lit by

moon or firelight, and scenes featuring returning collaborators Anya Taylor-Joy (*The Witch*) and Willem Dafoe (*The Lighthouse*) providing emotional or ethereal counterpoints to the narrative.

It's the usual bold, distinctive swing for Eggers, of a piece in its bleak tone yet still wildly different to his previous films. And if it doesn't entirely engage, the eventually stultifying violence overwhelming all else, it's still a shame that it didn't get more respect at the box office.

☉ **Extras** Eggers has gone on record about not having final cut, and a traumatic post-production process. There is, unsurprisingly, zero discussion of that here, with the time mostly given over to detailing how much effort went into the historical minutiae. Much is said – in Eggers's breezy, entertaining commentary and elsewhere – about the research involved in everything from the biggest sets to the tiniest pieces of prop work, especially in “An Ageless Epic” (11 minutes). Other featurettes offer the usual blend of the director and



THE SEVENTH CURSE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1986 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Lam Ngai Kai

▶ Cast Chin Siu-ho, Dick Wei, Maggie Cheung, Chow Yun-fat

BLU-RAY DEBUT This genre-masher from Hong Kong ties into two long-running book series; author Ni Kuang even cameos in the framing device. But it's more useful to know that it pinches shamelessly from *Indiana Jones* and *Alien*.

We learn that adventurer Dr Yuen (Chin Siu-ho) took a trip to Thailand, rescuing a woman from sacrifice to a tribe's Old Ancestor. Cursed by a sorcerer, he must now return before the results prove fatal.

The “homages” aren't subtle. At one point Yuen runs from a giant, rolling Buddha's head. The Old Ancestor transforms into a winged xenomorph. And a Muppet-y “ghost-child” has a penchant for bursting out of chests. This may be the only film where two different *Alien* rip-offs scrap. It's a cavalcade of nonsense, but the furious pace means you are never more than two minutes from a bullet-feat, a fight, or some gross-out gore.

☉ **Extras** Choose the Cantonese version or the export cut; of the three critical commentaries, Frank Djeong's more sedately paced and fact-loaded solo track on the former is the best. A Chin Siu-ho interview runs over two hours; the 12 minutes on this film include a skeleton-fight anecdote which brings to mind Bela Lugosi wrestling an octopus in *Ed Wood*. Plus: an insight-free appreciation (eight minutes); trailers; poster; art cards. **Ian Bertram**

No animals were harmed in the making of – oh.



“Eggers too often meanders when he should speed up”

cast talking about the characters (10 minutes) and bringing specific sequences to life, including the raid sequence (four minutes), Amleth's initiation ritual (four minutes), and the Knattleikr game (three minutes), as well as how budgetary considerations pushed the crew to rainy Northern Ireland (five minutes).

Behind-the-scenes stars are effects supervisor Sam Conway, who enmeshes about fake bodies you can choose where to stah, and cinematographer Jarin Blaschke, who shudders at the memory of having to light window-free huts. Nine deleted and extended scenes don't add much, unless you need to watch 30 seconds of boats being hauled ashore. **James White**

The film was nearly a Skarsgård sibling affair, but Bill dropped out of the role of Thorir due to schedule changes.



Perhaps the very definition of futility right here.

THE SEA BEAST

Moby-Dick pic

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 PG SVOD

(Also in selected cinemas)

▶ Director Chris Williams

▶ Cast Karl Urban, Zaris-Angel Hator, Jared Harris, Marianne Jean-Baptiste

NETFLIX You know that saying about throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks? The makers of *The Sea Beast* have done this, but instead of a wall, they've thrown it at the sea. What didn't sink has made it into this energetic adventure, which involves everything from pirates to kaiju monster battles; *Moby-Dick* vengeance missions to cute little *Lilo & Stitch* critters.

The action's set on a ship, the *Inevitable*, which sails the oceans looking for sea beasts to battle in revenge for centuries of ship-sinking. Jacob (Karl Urban) is set

to take over from Captain Crow (a formidable vocal performance from Jared Harris) once they finally kill their white whale... er, Red Bluster. But matters are complicated when a stowaway arrives, and young Maisie (Zaris-Angel Hator) starts to see the monsters rather differently from the crew.

You might see where the story's going from the outset, but that doesn't mean this isn't a voyage worth taking, mostly thanks to the gorgeous animation and inventive worldbuilding. The sound design for the many underwater sequences particularly impresses, providing a disorientingly visceral experience. Best enjoyed with your speakers turned up to 11.

Jaime Nelson

I Director Chris Williams was influenced by *Godzilla*, *King Kong*, *Master and Commander* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

THE APPOINTMENT

Going to the dogs

★★★★★

EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

OUT NOW! 15 Blu-ray/download

▶ Director Lindsey Vickers

▶ Cast Edward Woodward, Jane Marrow, Samantha Womack

BLU-RAY DEBUT Director Lindsey Vickers describes this BFI Flipside release as a "dream come true" – an apt choice of words, given the film's subject matter.

This doom-laden chiller never got a theatrical release, with the few who saw it doing so via TV or video. In some respects it has a TV movie feel, given the domestic focus: a couple (Edward Woodward, Jane Marrow) and their daughter (Samantha Womack), who sulks when a work engagement stops dad attending a violin recital. Petty chat about towels and bedclothes tethers the supernatural to a bland middle-

class world of floral wallpaper and pottery knick-knacks.

Otherwise, it feels too good for TV: too well-crafted, too measured, too oblique. Its themes of predestination and foresight recall *Don't Look Now*, as do the editing strategies; a tour de force sequence where the slowly wound tension is finally released explodes with cutaways of details. A jaw-dropping pre-credits hook, where a schoolgirl is yanked into woodland by an invisible force, impresses, as do scenes blurring dream and reality: is a devil-dog padding through the house, or was it just the sound of falling petals?

Leaving a great deal unexplained in a way which feels enigmatic instead of annoying, it's a film ripe for rediscovery.

▶ **Extras** With film elements lost, an SD tape proves an adequate source. Vickers's 1978 short "The



Edward Woodward would. Would you?

Lake" (33 minutes) also impresses, and has interesting commonalities. The director looks back on a career that fizzled out in disappointment ("I could have been somebody", he wryly notes) in a 41-minute interview; he also talks the BFI's Vic Pratt through behind-the-scenes photos (18 minutes). The commentary mostly sees Pratt explaining the film's MQ, before

Vickers pats him on the head, delighted to be appreciated. Plus: unremarkable interviews with Jane Marrow (16 minutes), the AD (10 minutes), and "The Lake" star Julie Peasgood (18 minutes); galleries of scripts, storyboards and stills; booklet. **Ian Bertram**

I Condon, the rottweiler who features in both *The Appointment* and "The Lake", also appeared in *The Onion*.



"If only I could be the man of today in some way."

SPIDERHEAD

Love Is The Drug

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2022 | 15 | SVOD

▶ **Director** Joseph Kosinski

▶ **Cast** Chris Hemsworth, Miles Teller, Jurnee Smollett, Mark Pagulo

NETFLIX In terms of timing, the arrival of *Spiderhead* couldn't be savvier. It's directed by *Top Gun: Maverick*'s Joseph Kosinski and stars that film's Miles Teller and *Thor: Love And Thunder*'s Chris Hemsworth, and the streamer will obviously be praying that this modestly moneyed chamber piece benefits from the box office-conquering might of those multiplex tentpoles.

But if *Maverick* was the kind of expansive, eye-wowing spectacle that you just had to see at the cinema, then *Spiderhead* is exactly the type of movie that feels at home on the small screen.

Adapted from a 2010 short story by George Saunders, it's the kind of chilly, claustrophobic SF tale Alex Garland might well have eyed. Set in a futuristic prison, it sees a bunch of cons experimented on by a sociopathic scientist (a horribly miscast Hemsworth), who's attached surgical implants into their backs through which he administers mind-altering drugs.

Kosinski navigates the tonal shifts well until the last 20 minutes, when this otherwise defiantly indie movie succumbs to Hollywooditis. It's a stylistic change too far, and sadly torpedoed the film's lofty ruminations on free will and redemption. Our advice? Read the short story instead (bit.ly/readspider). **Steve O'Brien**

One of the inmates is seen reading *Tenth Of December*, the George Saunders collection which includes the original story.

DOCTOR STRANGE

IN THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS

When Worlds Collide

★★★★★

EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 18 JULY**

(download out now)

2022 | 12 | Blu-ray (4K, standard), DVD/download

▶ **Director** Sam Raimi

▶ **Cast** Benedict Cumberbatch, Elizabeth Olsen, Rachel McAdams

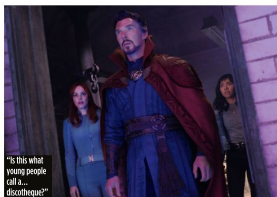
● **There's a telling symmetry** in Sam Raimi being at the helm of this movie. In 2002 he blueprinted the modern superhero blockbuster with *Spider-Man*; 20 years on, he returns to the landscape he helped create, like a boffin checking in on some crazy lab experiment that's had two decades to evolve, mutate and conquer the world.

The MCU is now so dense that *Multiverse Of Madness* feels, at times, like a sequel to every Marvel movie ever made – and with some

surprise cameos it's also a sequel to Marvel movies that were never made, at least not in this reality. Entangled in its own mythology, it demonstrates a master's touch in Applied Kevin Feige to keep up.

Always a big-hearted storyteller, Raimi keeps the emotional threads intact despite the mind-scrambling quantum shenanigans. Routinely deployed as a snooty snark-machine, Cumberbatch's Strange is allowed more depth here, while Elizabeth Olsen's Scarlet Witch, corrupted after the events of *WandaVision*, earns our empathy as much as our boos.

As a movie it's frequently a frantic, synthetic sugar-rush. But Raimi's signature energy and love of Halloween-parade spectacle makes it never less than watchable, with a surprisingly



"Is this what young people call a... discotheque?"

vicious streak that cuts through the convoluted plotting like a chainsaw through a Deadite.

● **Extras** Raimi, writer Michael Waldron and co-producer Richie Palmer provide audio commentary. A perfunctory Making Of (11 minutes) is accompanied by a more heartfelt celebration of Raimi (five minutes), along with his lucky totem '73 Oldsmobile. There's also a featurette on America Chavez

(three minutes), a gag reel (two minutes) and three minutes of deleted and extended scenes, which should please anyone craving more of Bruce Campbell's pizza vendor. We're all for keeping physical media alive, but nothing here feels essential if you already subscribe to Disney+. **Nick Setchfield**

The octopus *Gargantos* is inspired by Shuma-Gorath from the comics – a name first minted by Conan's Robert E Howard.



SUMMER TIME MACHINE BLUES

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2005 PG Blu-ray

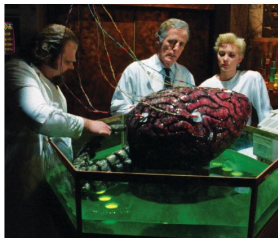
▶ Directors Katsuyuki Motohiro

▶ Cast Elita, Juri Ueno, Yoko Maki, Tsuyoshi Muro

BLU-RAY DEBUT Adapted from a popular theatrical play, this Japanese SF comedy is proof that the notion of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey is a universal constant in any language. It's a quantum farce, essentially: a bunch of college dorks, sweating through a boiling summer, use a handy time machine to hop back 24 hours and retrieve the soon-to-be-fritzed remote for the air conditioning system.

This amusingly thin premise sets up an escalating series of paradoxes as characters make running repairs on temporal punctuations caused by their own shenanigans. Shot in bright, almost hyperreal colors, it's a buoyant and deeply likeable movie, brimming with charming performances from a young cast.

▶ **Extras** An interview with writer Makoto Ueda from theatre group Europe Kikaku (30 minutes) provides insight into the original play; its journey to the screen and his own writing process, which he compares to programming game code. Also by Ueda, "Time Machine" (five minutes) and "A Little Fugue Of Love" (14 minutes) are paradox-riffing skits that complement the main attraction, while a comparison between the movie and the play (25 minutes) provides fascinating footage of the original theatrical production. Plus: trailer. **Nick Setchfield**



"Baste it and then it's 20 minutes per pound."

THE BRAIN

Remote control

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 1 AUGUST**

1988 15 Blu-ray

▶ Director Ed Hunt

▶ Cast Tom Bresnahan, Cynthia Preston, David Gale, George Buza

BLU-RAY DEBUT Cheesy '50s sci-fi is filtered through Cronenbergian horror in this Canadian straight-to-video horror, whose forebears include *Videodrome* and *The Blob*.

Tom Bresnahan is pretty boy Jim, who's sent to Dr Blakely of the Psychological Research Institute (Re-Animator's David Gale) after one too many high school pranks. Blakely is working in league with a giant man-eating brain (whose spinal-cord "tail" surely nods to *Fiend Without A Face*) to brainwash the population via his TV show – the ironically named *Independent Thinkers*.

Jim proves immune to the brain's hypnotic influence, but can he convince anyone of the danger? Played pretty straight, it's a film which promises more goofy, ironic fun than it actually delivers. The story's underdeveloped, and too much time is taken up with Jim being chased. Technically it's a bit rough around the edges, too, with

occasionally indistinct sound and an underwhelming score.

Still, the practical effects brain, with its dirty, drooling, demonic face, is a delight. The space-age architecture of the Xerox Research Centre Of Canada makes a fitting evil lair. And in the era of 24-hour news, the film has newfound relevance. Surely there must be a Fox News show called *Independent Thinkers*?

▶ **Extras** Five decent interviews (four from 2009's US release) include female lead Cynthia Preston (11 minutes) and co-star George Buza (13 minutes) – who recalls a final day of shooting lasting 36 hours. Composer Paul Zaza (11 minutes), who had a week to do the score, calls it "possibly the worst movie I've ever worked on". Art department guy Michael Borthwick (13 minutes) shows off the Brain face he rescued from a dumpster. And a fan (11 minutes) talks us through his collection of *The Brain* paraphernalia. Plus: three commentaries (the director, Bresnahan, the composer); gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

George Buza freed himself out weeks before the film wrapped by sticking a cotton bud in his ear and finding fake blood.

(ROUND UP)

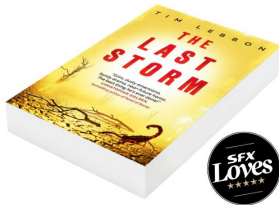


A shy girl becomes a superstar singer in a virtual world in Mamoru Hosoda's anime film **BELLE** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD). We said:

"A dazzling fairy tale for the social media age, as gorgeous to look at as it is hilarious and moving." The Zavvi-exclusive 4K Deluxe Edition comes with two Blu-ray discs of bonuses (over two hours' worth), Blu-ray of the film's soundtrack CD, A3 poster, 60-page booklet and 16 art cards. Sadly, review discs weren't available. Expect to pay about £50.

▶ **THE RIGHTeous** (18 July, Blu-ray) impressed us when it streamed on Arrow. Mostly a two-hander, it centres on a former man of the cloth and a mysterious drifter. We said: "A heady combination of tightly controlled performances, careful ambiguity, and fantastic dialogue."

▶ **Extras** include director's commentary, cast and crew interviews, and festival Q&As. **TENEBAE** (18 July, 4K) is our HD highlight. Dario Argento's 1982 giallo (which he claimed was set in the near-future, though you'd be hard-pressed to tell) centres on an author whose novels have inspired a string of murders. Bonuses from Arrow's 2017 Blu-ray and Synapse's 2016 US one are brought together; the only brand new one of note is a recreation of the shorter US edit. You also get a poster and six art cards. Finally, the latest TV box sets include **THE RISING** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD). Sky's show about a woman investigating her own murder, and **STAR TREK: DEEPER DECKS SEASON TWO** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD).



THE LAST STORM

Rain with a chance of terror

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

352 pages | Paperback, ebook

▶ Author Tim Lebbon

▶ Publisher Titan Books

© **The Silence** author **Tim Lebbon** is at his most ferocious with *The Last Storm*. Set in a near future United States where climate change has left large swathes of the country parched and increasingly inhospitable, the story concerns a fractured family of rainmakers, born with the ability to call downpours out of the clearest blue skies.

Jesse has rejected his heritage after summoning a storm that brought venomous snakes and scorpions tumbling out of the clouds. This fear of his abilities drove a wedge between him and his daughter Ash after she tried to become a rainmaker, tearing the family apart as Ash fled her father's wrath. When Jesse's ex-wife Karina appears with the news that Ash has resurfaced and is trying to command the rain, they rush to save their estranged child from the terrible power that threatens to consume them all.

Lebbon's prose sizzles on the page in this tale of extreme weather, revenge, and the longing

for redemption. There's a tactile, visceral quality to the descriptions of being caught in a thunderstorm or baking in the heat of the desert, and a raging wildfire becomes a monstrous character unto itself, insatiably devouring everything in its path. The perilous new reality for those affected by the hostile weather has produced changes in society, from Soakers who deliver water to dry towns for a hefty price, to Hotbloods, sun-addled

“Lebbon jumps between different perspectives, which effectively builds suspense”

drop-outs who prowl the dwindling desert towns, preying on the unwary.

The cast is no less compelling than the unsettling portraits of a country blighted by climate change. Jesse is a man haunted by his past and burdened by guilt over his broken family but, like an addict, still longing for the rush that comes with rainmaking. Ash is further down that road, often lost in what she calls The Tumult,

a waking trance that connects her to the storms within her longing for release. Karina is driven by the desire to protect her daughter and brings a potent sense of urgency to the plot; her opposite number, meanwhile is Jimi, a Soaker hunting Ash to settle an old score.

Lebbon jumps between different perspectives, which effectively builds suspense in an increasingly desperate race against time and keeps everything grounded in the inner lives of his characters. It's a harsh world, where good intentions count for little. Ash only wants to help, dreaming of bringing water back to dried-out communities and restoring a sense of balance to the land, but there's a deep streak of horror in the secret behind Jesse and Ash's rainmaking, and this encroaching darkness becomes inexorably stronger as events continue to unfold.

There are shades of Stephen King, HP Lovecraft and *Stranger Things* in this aspect of the story, as Ash reaches across worlds to bring forth the rain, and while King is an obvious lodestone for contemporary horror, Lebbon shares his talent for jolting the reader with shockingly vivid bursts of violence and transporting them inside the splintering psyche of a killer.

Jimi may be a repugnant villain, but he follows his own consistent internal logic, and Lebbon uses the character to articulate the novel's central themes of the burden of familial guilt, as Jimi's murderous intentions are born out of actions in Jesse's past.

For anyone who found Netflix's adaptation of *The Silence* to be an overwhelming counterpart to *A Quiet Place*, *The Last Storm* will wash such thoughts away. This is genre fiction delivered with style and imagination, but amongst all the bloodshed and mounting terror, Lebbon's novel draws its emotional power from a family facing their trauma in a landscape blighted by its own scars.

David West

I Tim Lebbon tried writing his first draft in longhand for the first time with *The Last Storm*, filling up eight big notebooks.



THE LAST BLADE PRIEST

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

536 pages | Paperback, ebook

▶ Author WP Wiles

▶ Publisher Angry Robot Books

© **Religious schisms, dying demi-gods, and a land teetering towards war...** WP Wiles goes for broke with the opening book in his first fantasy series.

The story unfolds from two perspectives. Anton is a blade priest, raised from childhood to perform ritual human sacrifice to appease the guardians of a sacred mountain, despite being repulsed by the practice. He's a fascinating character, holding a position of authority yet burdened with the self-awareness to doubt his ability to rise to the challenges before him. Then there's Inar, Master-Builder of a kingdom smarting from its defeat by the League of Free Cities. Ordered to spy on one of the League's leaders, Anzola, Inar becomes close to her ward Dana, who holds a terrible secret.

Wiles's worldbuilding is genuinely impressive, from the power struggles within Anton's faith, torn between hardliners and reformers, to the gruesome imagining of Elves as terrifying berserkers. The storytelling is no less accomplished, juggling political intrigue, warring kingdoms and plotlines that weave around one another.

Despite the novel's scale and complexity, Wiles keeps everything emotionally grounded through Inar and Anton's inner lives, the two grappling with moral dilemmas even as they struggle to survive a world plunging into bloodshed and chaos. **David West**



UPGRADE

★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Blake Crouch

► Publisher Macmillan

◎ Ever get the feeling you're not fulfilling your true potential? When an investigation exposes Gene Protection Agency operative Logan Ramsay to a suspicious pathogen, his DNA gets an upgrade that turns him into a stronger, smarter, more agile kind of Homo sapiens. The trouble is, being the best version of himself isn't about to make his life – personal or professional – any easier...

After flirting with body horror in its early chapters, *Upgrade* quickly morphs into a slick conspiracy thriller, as Ramsay tries to understand how and why he's on his way to becoming a superhero. For the most part, it's page-turning stuff. *Wayward Pines* author Blake Crouch keeps things moving with propulsive prose and snappy, efficient dialogue. He also does an impressive job of creating a plausible near-future, where environmental catastrophe is nigh, and human genetic modification is normal.

The book goes off the rails in the final act, however, as the antagonists – whose motivations are about as nuanced as those of a '70s Bond villain – come increasingly to the fore. Rather than growing into the clever detective story teased by its earlier chapters, the book ends up taking too much inspiration from dumb action blockbusters. The result is a conclusion that can't quite live up to its hero's superior intellect. **Richard Edwards**



HER MAJESTY'S ROYAL COVEN

Spicing things up

★★★★★

► RELEASED 21 JULY

464 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Juno Dawson

► Publisher Harper Voyager

◎ The sisters have long been doing it for themselves. So runs the set-up for YA star Juno Dawson's first novel for adults, which offers us a contemporary Britain where powerful witches walk among us. More than this, the women of Her Majesty's Royal Coven (HMRC) are part of a cover official department, which dates back to the Tudor era.

So far so urban fantastical, but this is also a novel of the day-to-day and the domestic, about the friendship of a group of Spice Girls fans from Hebdon Bridge who have, as they have grown up, also grown apart. While ambitious Helena, for example, now leads HMRC, Niamh's life is far more about her work as a vet and an underlying search for contentment rather than renown or power.

The women's lives are about to be turned upside down by the appearance of young warlock Theo, whose abilities, it's feared, may be a harbinger of difficulties

ahead: trouble of an end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it seriousness.

This is a novel with a trans character at its core. More than this, it can be read as a withering critique of those who reject the idea that trans women are women. Dawson is trans herself, so the choice of theme is clearly deeply personal, but she's careful to avoid becoming too didactic. Instead, the book is in key respects about the tension between the top-down worldview of Helena, who so convinces herself she's acting for the good of others that she's unable to see when her actions have become self-serving, and Niamh's neo-hippy-tinged take on how to make it through this life.

If there's a major criticism, it's that Coven doesn't always quite escape being a trilogy opener; it seems, at moments, too obviously to be setting up further books. But no matter, it's also magnificently queer, genuinely funny and life-affirming without ever being sentimental, offering a gritty take on love and the extended families we build. **Jonathan Wright**

I Dawson will be visiting Waterstones shops in London, Birmingham and Manchester from 18-20 July: see bit.ly/junodawson



THRUST

★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Lidia Yuknavitch

► Publisher Canongate

◎ Earlier this year, the International Panel on Climate Change declared that one billion people are at risk of losing their homes to flooding by 2050. Such a drastic reshaping of our habitat will, of course, mean mass displacement on a scale as yet undreamt of. *Thrust* weaves together such displacement and climate change in a complex story that flits back and forth between multiple times and places, and various narrative forms, with letters, ethnographies, charts and lists sitting alongside more conventional storytelling.

The novel's spine is the Statue of Liberty: its design by a French sculptor, its construction by a largely migrant labour force and, 200 years later, its submersion under the rising waters of "the Brook" (Brooklyn). Along the way, there's a girl who travels in time by swimming and gets repeatedly swallowed by a whale, a murderer who feverishly draws imaginary cities in his own blood after his pencils are taken away by guards, and an explicitly kinky correspondence between the French sculptor and his muse, who runs a school (and possibly a brothel) in New York.

It's a challenging, wrong-footing and quite bonkers read, and while it does all come together in striking, moving and (mostly) satisfying ways, it takes some patience to get there. **Nic Clarke**



DOCTOR WHO NOVELISATIONS

Up Pompeii and the Scottish play

► **RELEASED 14 JULY**

171 pages/174 pages Paperback/
ebook/audiobook

► Authors James Moran, Rona Munro

► Publisher BBC Books

● **Sometimes it's the Doctor**

Who stories which don't quite achieve their full potential which make the better novelisations.

James Moran's *The Fires Of Pompeii* ★★☆☆, which calls for the Doctor to decide whether to save all of humanity or condemn 20,000 people to death, was always a bit of a heartbreaker. In bringing it to prose he's made little embellishments here and there: there are further ominous signs of Vesuvius's coming eruption, like the sounds of grinding rock and poisoned birds raining down from the sky. Moran is also very good at getting inside Donna's head, revealing her thought

processes – which are not quite as self-assured as you might expect.

There's a faint whiff of Douglas Adams – Ford Prefect is quoted at one point, and there's a reference to clipboards being banned on the planet Ryman IV – but the style never feels as forced as when Eric Saward tried it out for novelisations like *The Twin Dilemma* back in the day.

Moran also gets amusingly salty, explaining (for the benefit of internet smartasses) what exactly a *deus ex machina* ending is ("It doesn't just mean 'An ending I didn't like'"). But as there wasn't anything much about the finished episode which felt particularly undeveloped or unclear, the novelisation doesn't come as a great revelation.

Rona Munro's *The Eaters Of Light* ★★☆☆, however, felt rather abbreviated on TV, and

benefits enormously from having more room to breathe. Some of the events driving the narrative (like the mysterious slaughter of an entire Roman Legion) can now be dramatised, and the emotional stakes much more clearly spelt out. On-screen, legionary Lucius was just a bisexual kid who fancied Bill. Here, he's given a proper backstory: a previous life as a haulier, and a doomed love affair with a fellow legionary.

Motivations make better sense all round now, and a couple of neat additions – like young Pict Kar riding on the back of a bull, and the Picts (and the Doctor) dancing reels before their final face-off with the monster of the piece – would have been highlights of the episode. If the story didn't particularly wow you on TV, the novelisation will offer a fresh perspective. Both books, incidentally, would make a good gift for curious-minded Who-loving tweens, who will probably come away googling "pyroclastic surge" and "tortoise formation".

“The novelisation offers a fresh perspective”

This month's other two Target Collection releases aren't technically new. About a decade ago, David Fisher was asked by BBC Audio to novelise two of his Fourth Doctor adventures (both previously adapted, by Terrance Dicks, in minimum-effort mode): swashbuckling *The Prisoner Of Zenda* riff “The Androids Of Tara” and killer standing stones tale “The Stones Of Blood”, with characteristically amusing results.

They've now made the transfer from audiobooks to print. *Androids* comes with a note on the edits required for this new medium; *Stones* has an introduction by the late writer's son, and an afterword by BBC Audio's commissioning editor.

Calvin Baxter

► An adaptation of Peter Harness's “The Zygon Invasion” which was previously announced will now be released in 2023.



THE BIG DARK SKY

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 19 JULY**

390 pages Hardcover/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Dean Koontz

► Publisher Thomas & Mercer

● **There's a pattern**

developing here. Dean Koontz's previous novel *Quicksilver* was about a guy with preternatural luck. His latest book grapples with the concept of Jungian synchronicity, the idea that humans can subconsciously – on a quantum level – will extraordinary coincidences into happening. Is this Koontz examining his authorial role on a meta level? Or just finding excuses for lazy plotting?

Something is killing random people across the US, and it's accessing the internet of everything to do so – everything including US government satellite weapons. Meanwhile, a disparate bunch of characters are being drawn to a remote area of Montana: a girl who once lived in a ranch there, who's recovering long-buried memories; a private detective investigating what drove the new owners out of the ranch; a fanatic with an apocalyptic manifesto for humankind; a scientist who believes quantum synchronicity may save the world.

It's enticingly written, with intriguing mysteries, really icky gore, fun characters and dry wit, plus there's a deeply chilling twist in the epilogue. But the book never really explores or exploits quantum synchronicity. Characters talk about the subject a lot, but if they didn't keep talking about coincidences you'd think this book is barely more contrived than most thrillers. **Dave Golder**



THE DAUGHTER OF DOCTOR MOREAU

★★★★★

RELEASED 19 JULY

304 pages | Hardcover/ebook/audiobook

Author Silvia Moreno-Garcia
Publisher Jo Fletcher Books

© A retelling of one of popular culture's enduring stories, by Mexican-Gothic's Silvia Moreno-Garcia, is a tantalising prospect. Sadly it doesn't quite land.

The story is a satisfying twist on the familiar. It's told in alternate chapters by the two protagonists, Montgomery Laughton and Carlota Moreau, who live on a verdant estate in Yucatán, Mexico, far removed from general society are financed by Hernando Lizalde, who hopes to create new, pliant labourers now the native Maya are rebelling. Carlota wants nothing more than to live her whole life there, assisting her father and her friends among the hybrids – but nothing can stay the same forever. And the arrival of Lizalde's charming son Eduardo brings change faster than they expect.

It's an intriguing set-up, in a well-realised world of jungles and rebels, privilege and pain. Montgomery is brilliantly drawn, an alcoholic haunted by the tragedies of his past and the debts of his present. Carlota, however, is less so, a clichéd dutiful daughter struggling with maturity and desire and an all-too-obvious secret. And the parallels between the hybrids and the rebels, both struggling for any kind of recognition or respect, are ultimately too neat. An experiment that goes awry.

Rhian Drinkwater



ONCE UPON A FEVER

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

323 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author Angharad Walker
Publisher Chicken House

© Set in an alternate, gothic London ("Lundain"), this YA novel depicts a world in which emotions can become bizarre magical illnesses – anger, for example, can result in the victim breathing fire. Young sisters Payton and Ani Darke live in a magical hospital (think *Harry Potter's* St Mungo's) and dream of curing their mother, whose grief has caused her to slip into a weird, watery coma. After Ani meets a boy with a literal Midas touch, Payton teams with a doctor who might be able to help their mum – but there's a good chance it's all a bit evil...

Angharad Walker has no problem conjuring delightful, perky kids and has drawn a vivid magic-ravaged world. But there's a fundamental problem with her characters: they all act completely normally. Surely this is a no-no in a society in which their emotions could cause a deadly illness? Wouldn't everybody, especially the children, be utterly paranoid and terrified of their feelings? True, there are brief mentions of calming drugs, but it all feels a bit hand-wavy and half-hearted – almost as though Walker was scared to explore the fascinating rules of the world she'd created.

While *Once Upon A Fever* is still an enjoyable read, there's another, far more punchy and thought-provoking book buried inside it.

Jayne Nelson



FLAMES OF MIRA

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

568 pages | Hardcover/ebook/audiobook

Author Clay Harmon
Publisher Solaris Books

© Clay Harmon aims for epic fantasy with his debut, but a passive protagonist and muddled execution dampen *Flames of Mira*.

The first in the Rift Walker series, its ostensible hero is Ig, bound by magic to the ruthless Magnate Sorrelo Adriann, who governs the subterranean city of Augustin. When a rebellion deposes the Magnate, Ig joins with Sorrelo's heirs, Emil and Sara, to reclaim the throne.

Ig is an elemental, able to wield molten lava in combat – but there's considerable inconsistency between how dangerous everyone claims Ig is, and how often he's overpowered as his capabilities fluctuate to fit the plotting. Unable to disobey Sorrelo, he makes precious few important decisions, and it's not clear what Ig wants, so he remains reactive to events and people around him rather than driving the story. Similarly, there's no clear morality – Ig is outraged by others' violence while dispatching anyone in his way.

Action scenes are often hard to follow and the worldbuilding is murky, struggling to articulate how the subterranean societies function, the nature of their religion, or their economics. The plot insists Ig falls for Sara, but there's a homoerotic attraction to Emil that's more believable and interesting even if Harmon refuses to give it voice. So *Flames of Mira* sputters rather than burns. David West

REISSUES

Pick of the paperbacks this issue: **THE BOOK OF SAND** (★★★★, 4 August, Penguin), by Theo Clarke – a nom de plume for Clare Dunkel, best known for her crime fiction as Mo Hayder, and who sadly died last year. It has two strands: one centres on a group living in a hostile desert in fear of predatory beings; the other a Washington, DC teenager with an uncanny ability to predict the weather. We said: "A wild head trip that freely mingles the fantastic with the scientific... a work of irresistibly compelling storytelling and prodigious imagination." Grady Hendrix's latest, **THE FINAL GIRL SUPPORT GROUP** (★★★★, out now, Titan), is a very meta effort which asks what happens to teens who survive slasher horrors after the credits roll. Six survivors have been meeting up for years; now someone starts trying to pick them off one by one. We said: "Packed with peril, full of twists, and zips along at a pace... Rammed with Easter eggs, this is a must read for stalk 'n' slash fans." Finally, Hervé Le Tellier's **THE ANOMALY** (★★★★, 4 August, Penguin) was a huge phenomenon in France. One night, a Paris to New York flight and all its passengers are inexplicably duplicated, with one plane landing in March, but the other not arriving until June. Which version of the passengers gets to keep their homes and jobs? We said: "The premise is reminiscent of TV series such as *The Returned*... It's a novel full of ideas, and Le Tellier's prose draws the reader through them smoothly."





STAR WARS: SHADOW OF THE SITH

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

468 pages | Hardback, ebook/
audiobook

► Author Adam Christopher

► Publisher Del Rey

◎ Just as *Rogue One*

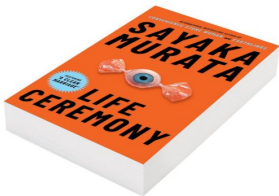
fashioned an entire movie out of *A New Hope*'s opening crawl, this *Star Wars* novel builds on backstory fleetingly mentioned in *The Rise of Skywalker*. Set a decade or so before the sequel trilogy, *Shadow of the Sith* follows Luke and Lando on a mission to track down Ochi of Bestoon, a crotchety Jedi hunter with connections to the Sith world of Exegol and the fate of Rey's parents.

Some *Star Wars* spin-offs feel like they're plugging gaps for the sake of it, but this one feels like a welcome addition to the mythology. Adam Christopher embraces the opportunity to explore the relationship between two original trilogy characters who've barely interacted in the movies, and drops them into an engaging mystery involving criminal gangs and a conspiracy involving the Dark Side.

The book also contains plenty of treats for fans, including some admirably deep cuts – the reference to a CAP-2 walker will be welcomed by '80s kids still scarred by the fact their Kenner toy never appeared on screen.

Ultimately, though *Shadow of the Sith* can't fix *The Rise of Skywalker*'s many flaws, it does at least help a messy film to make more sense.

Richard Edwards



LIFE CEREMONY

The Edible Woman

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 14 JULY**

256 pages | Paperback, ebook

► Author Sayaka Murata

► Publisher Granta Books

◎ Anyone familiar with Sayaka

Murata's novels will know how often she writes about women who are labelled freaks. Not because they're offensive or outlandish, but because they feel different, because of what they like to eat, because they don't enjoy sex, or simply because they haven't married and produced two perfect children by the age of 30.

In her first short story collection, Murata is just as concerned with women who don't conform. These are women who cook dishes from imaginary fantasy realms and jump between personalities based on different people's expectations.

It's incredibly visceral, using food and the human body to chip away at our ingrained prejudices – and not just towards women, but society as a whole. It's easy to feel revolted when reading "Life Ceremony", where a woman's

“Murata doesn't tell these stories just to provoke”

dead friend is chopped up and cooked into stews and stir-fries, or “A First-Rate Material”, in which a young woman is given a wedding veil made out of her father's skin. But Murata doesn't tell these stories simply to provoke; instead, she wants us to examine why they make us so uncomfortable. After all, if we love someone who's died, shouldn't we consume them rather than let them go to waste?

There are other strange delights. The disconcerting “Poochie” follows two schoolgirls who turn an overworked businessman into their pet; the dreamily dystopian “The Time Of The Large Star” takes place in a land of eternal sun, and there's a streak of melancholy in “Love On The Breeze”, where a girl falls in love with a cloud-like creature.

While Murata's writing is constantly unsettling, it's a little anticlimactic when the collection doesn't bleed into full-fledged body horror. It's strange, yet oddly shy. But maybe that's intentional. Murata's interest isn't in delivering fast thrills, but in creeping under the reader's skin and pricking us when we least expect it. *Kimberley Ballard*

► Murata worked in a small corner shop for 18 years, writing 11 novels and two non-fiction books in her time off.

ALSO OUT

As ever, there's lots more books we couldn't fit in. Ed McDonald's medieval fantasy **DAUGHTER OF REDWINTER** (out now, Gollancz) has a Scottish flavour. It follows an on-the-run 17-year-old able to see ghosts, who ends up inside the fortress-monastery of warrior magicians – where she'll be put to death if her ability is discovered. Fans of Octavia Butler and Emily St John Mandel are the target market for Emmi Ibranta's **THE MOONDAY LETTERS** (out now, Titan). Told in epistolary form, it sees an Earth-born healer searching for their

Mars-born spouse after the latter's disappearance on a work trip – a search which takes her from the affluent colonies of Mars to an Earth devastated by climate change. An alternate Bronze Age is the backdrop for Miles Cameron's blood-soaked, monster-filled **AGAINST ALL GODS** (out now, Gollancz). It involves self-absorbed gods, the “Godborn” (half-human offspring of the gods) and humans scheming to overthrow their divine rulers using weapons

fashioned from star-metal – the one thing that can kill them. The history of British animation studio Smallfilms is the subject of academic Chris Pellant's **BEYOND BAGPUS** (14 July, BFI), which draws on interviews with key collaborators. As the title suggests, it's not all about the old, saggy cloth cat, delving into the likes of *Ivor the Engine*, *Noggin The Nog*, *Pogles Wood* and *The Clangers* too. Finally, this issue's

Rosalee Award goes to **UNOFFICIAL HOCUS POCUS CROSS-STITCH** (out now, Ulysses Press). It includes 25 patterns paying homage to the fantasy-comedy about a trio of soul-sucking witches.



THE
WRITE
STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR
QUESTIONNAIRE



Tim Lebbon

He might let you buy him dinner if you ask nicely...



JORY JESSONS

Describe the room in which you typically write.

► My office is book-lined, with framed book covers on the wall and a nice view out onto our little garden. It's my den.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

► Music makes the world go round, and I always have something playing when I'm writing. Sometimes it's rock – Mumford & Sons to Metallica, and anything in between – but for a novel's first draft it's more likely to be movie soundtracks.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

► *The Silence*, which became a great movie starring Kiernan Shipka and Stanley Tucci. It's not often an idea hits me like a train, but I distinctly remember this one: "Blind creatures that hunt by sound, and I'll call it *The Silence*". And my new novel *The Last Storm*, a mix of horror and climate change thriller, with the story of a damaged family at its centre.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

► My novella *The Reach Of Children* was about my mother's passing 16 years ago, and it was incredibly tough to write because it incorporated (in a fictional setting) so many personal moments from before and after her death. I'm extremely proud of the novella, but I've not re-read it since.

Were you a keen reader as a child? Which books were your favourites?

► Aged around nine or 10 I was reading a book a day from the local library, where a friend and I used to help out. I have vivid memories of spending a couple of weeks reading every volume of the Willard Price

“No story ever comes out as perfectly as you might first imagine”

Adventure novels [14 in all]. Then my mum gave me James Herbert's *The Rats* to read and I never looked back.

What would be your desert island book?

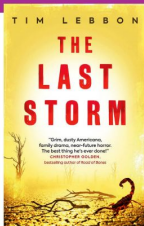
► *The Stand* by Stephen King. It's a huge, sprawling horror masterpiece that has influenced my writing ever since. And I could make a raft out of it.

What's the best gift you've ever received from a reader?

► I was once invited out for a birthday meal by the girlfriend of a reader of mine. I didn't know them at the time, and it was just the three of us. I was... hesitant, but it was a nice restaurant. And they are a lovely couple who are now friends!

What's the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

► The glamour! The money! I adore writing, and love the fact

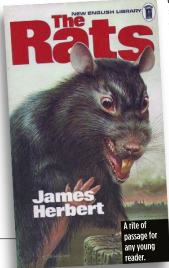


that I can make a living from my hobby. But it is a real job, with real job things like money worries, deadlines, and having to work really hard to make it a success.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've read?

► Not advice as such, but a quote from Arthur Machen which goes, "I dream in fire but work in clay". No story ever comes out as perfectly as you might first imagine, and if you accept that as a writer it can prevent a lot of angst and stress.

The Last Storm by Tim Lebbon is on sale now, published by Titan Books.



A rite of passage for any young reader.

IMMORTAL X-MEN

Sinister goings-on

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ **Publisher** Marvel Comics

▶ **Writer** Kieron Gillen

▶ **Artist** Lucas Werneck

ISSUES 5-7 The new “Destiny Of

X” era of the X-Men is in full swing, and the latest ongoing title to join the fray is yet more proof that if you want to have a bunch of god-like superpowered characters scheming and backstabbing, give Kieron Gillen a call.

The writer of *Eternals*, *Journey Into Mystery* and *The Wicked + The Divine* has returned to the world of everything X-related with *Immortal X-Men*, which is packed to the brim with his usual hallmarks of crackling dialogue and intricate storytelling. The focus here is on the Quiet Council,

the 12-strong ruling government of the new mutant society of Krakoa, which is already in uproar thanks to the earth-shaking revelations from 2021’s *Inferno* miniseries.

When Magneto decides to step down from his council seat, the resulting power struggle goes in some very dangerous directions, but between political shenanigans and giant monster attacks, it’s the behind-the-scenes plotting from certain council members that could be the true threat....

Chief among these plotters is Mister Sinister, and it’s in this hilariously flamboyant, cape-loving villain that the series finds its scene-stealing star. Even with each issue focusing on a different council member, Gillen’s infinitely bitchy take on the character tends to hijack the attention at every

opportunity. That’s not to say Gillen isn’t giving other characters their due as well, especially mutants like dangerous precog Destiny, religious fundamentalist Exodus and uneasy messiah Hope Summers. Much of the story so far occurs in lengthy council meetings, and Gillen keeps every scene full of dramatic tension, while knowing when to drop a large-scale set-piece or bonkers plot twist.

He’s also digging deep into the world-building ideas that have been foundational in all the X-titles since Jonathan Hickman’s epic relaunch, and introduces a bunch of intriguing new developments with huge potential.

“These are big, brainy and brilliant examples of superhero storytelling at its very best”

He couldn’t have a better collaborator in artist Lucas Werneck, who brings a sense of genuine style and polish to the series. Switching effortlessly from quiet characterisation to massive kaiju-smashing action, Werneck gives the series a strong sense of energy and scope, while also showing a great eye for striking images and gorgeous costume design in particular.

These first three issues are big, brainy and brilliant examples of superhero storytelling at its very best. A sprawling comic-book political thriller, *Immortal X-Men* is a wildly inventive ride that fully lives up to the colossal ambition of Jonathan Hickman’s original concepts. Let’s have plenty more, please. **Saxon Bulcock**

I Gillen’s list of tonal and thematic influences for *Immortal X-Men* include *The West Wing*, *House Of Cards* and *Veep*.



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ **Publisher** Marvel Comics

▶ **Writer** Zeb Wells

▶ **Artist** John Romita Jr

ISSUES 5-8 When is a reboot not

a reboot? *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue one (one of three first issues in nine years) may hold the answer. By teaming former *Amazing Spider-Man* writer Zeb Wells with former *Amazing Spider-Man* artist John Romita Jr, Marvel must have assumed they’d assembled a dream team. Sadly, the dream’s a nightmare.

The plot’s a major problem, with the central mystery, “What did Peter Parker do?” making you feel like you’ve missed a bunch of issues. Not ideal for a relaunch, which is supposed to be a blank slate.

We open on Spider-Man gasping, then screaming, in the middle of a giant crater. We don’t know why. That’s actually a highlight of Peter’s life for these first three issues, which see everyone from Aunt May to the Avengers angry at him, for unexplained reasons. MJ has moved on, becoming a mum, off-page. Meanwhile, classic villain Tombstone blames Spidey for all his problems. Yay! Fun!

Parker’s traditionally a loser, but this takes the concept to new lows, feeling more like an adaptation of *Martyrs* than a Marvel comic. The art’s another issue: Romita Jr seems to be going through the motions, his usual dynamism almost entirely absent. Our advice? Wait for the next rebirth, there’ll be one along any minute.

Sam Ashurst





THE LEGEND OF LUTHER ARKWRIGHT

★★★★★

RELEASED 14 JULY

Publisher Jonathan Cape

Writer/artist Bryan Talbot

GRAPHIC NOVEL Ahead of its time when it first appeared in 1978 but now bang on trend, Bryan Talbot's multiverse-spanning epic about an enigmatic agent with the ability to move between different dimensions owes more to Michael Moorcock than the Marvel Universe.

The first of the three volumes not to be serialised initially, this 240-page tale benefits from its more expansive canvas, allowing the labyrinthine plot to unfold at a measured pace. Pitted against Proteus, an all-powerful fellow "Homo novus" who doesn't share his benevolence towards mere sapiens, a wounded Arkwright embarks on a psychic cat and mouse game across multiple parallels, joined by incorrigible sidekick Harry Fairfax and Amy, an intriguing new character who boasts some interesting special abilities.

Talbot has returned to *Arkwright* over the years during periods of political turmoil, and here he draws amusing Brexit parallels, as Arkwright visits an isolationist dystopian England governed by a Boris-esque leader. Eschewing the colour of 1999's *Heart Of Empire*, he returns to the black and white art of the original *Adventures Of Luther Arkwright*, imbuing his linework with a rugged naïveté that harks back to his roots in '70s underground comics.

Stephen Jewell



BATMAN/SUPERMAN: WORLD'S FINEST

Demon Days

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher DC Comics

Writer Mark Waid

Artist Dan Mora

ISSUES 1-5 Throwing together the Dark Knight and the Man of Steel is a team-up strategy that's been popular for decades, and the latest *Batman/Superman* ongoing title is an unapologetic throwback to traditional comic-book action. This colourful romp is as old-school as they come, offering a bright and largely continuity-free action-fest that barely pauses for breath.

The plot of this first arc is simple: an ancient demon called Nezu has risen again to cause havoc, and he's waging a proxy war against Batman and Superman by fighting via some of their most dangerous adversaries.

It's up to Clark and Bruce to find and defeat this evil, and the stage is set for an energetic if shallow adventure that

compensates for its distinctly old-fashioned storytelling approach with the sheer volume of stuff happening. Veteran comic writer Mark Waid seems to be using this first arc to cram in as many DC characters as humanly possible, but does find a few brief pauses between the relentless set-pieces to pull off some nicely played character moments showing the trust between the two protagonists.

The real star here is Dan Mora on art duties, who brings his usual mix of craftsmanship and pop energy to the non-stop action, while also making sure that each page is well-structured and visually compelling. He can't quite cancel out the story's sense of overfamiliarity, but his art and the genial, accessible tone do at least leave this as an engaging and hyperactive dose of superhero nostalgia. **Saxon Bulcock**

I The original *World's Finest* comic ran from 1941 to 1986; it didn't properly do a Superman/Batman team-up until 1994.



THE SANDMAN UNIVERSE: NIGHTMARE COUNTRY

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher DC Comics

Writer James Tynion IV

Artist Lisandro Estherren

ISSUES 1-5 The latest addition to DC's Sandman line puts a new spin on one of the original comic's most memorable villains: the Corinthian.

Flynn is an artist, but recently she's been painting just one subject: a grotesque figure she calls the Smiling Man. She sees him everywhere she goes, tongues lapping grotesquely from his eye sockets. Flynn's friends are concerned for her sanity, but she's convinced that something weird is afoot, even before two demonic assassins force her to go on the run...

Casting the Corinthian as a quasi-detective figure trying to solve a cosmic mystery is a fun twist on a familiar baddy, and the human characters are all well-scripted. Art-wise this is a treat, too, with Lisandro Estherren's pencils and Patricio Delpeche's watercolours presenting a dark and dangerous real world, while an ever-shifting range of guest artists tackle the Dreaming.

Gaiman's work casts a long shadow, though. Mr Agony and Mr Ecstasy are formidable foes, but very similar to *Neverwhere*'s Croup and Vandalism. And while we're promised this'll be a road trip across contemporary America, the first three issues drag their heels. A solid start, but you suspect the best is yet to come. **Will Salmon**

THE QUARRY

Camping it up



RELEASED OUT NOW!

Reviewed on PC

Also on PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4,

Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One

Publisher 2K Games

VIDEOGAME Run or hide? Shoot or

hold your fire? Turn and face your monstrous pursuer or clamber up that ancient old tree that *definitely* isn't a wood-based death trap?

Developer Supermassive Games has perfected the art of tearing the throat out of attractive teens and making you feel really bad about it – all because you were the one who accidentally took your finger off the “hold breath” button when you were offered a cup of IRL tea.

The Quarry is the studio's latest foray into choice-based narrative horror, and it's a ripping good yarn. Here we meet nine gently

obnoxious smart-talking teen counsellors as they spend one night too long at Hackett's Summer Camp. No spoilers, but while the kids have gone home, something significantly hungrier has arrived.

This is a beautiful but deadly woodland retreat. Whether you're choosing a dialogue option mid deftly directed cut-scene, or shining a phone torch around a misty abandoned island, *The Quarry* looks photorealistic at points. Every blood-spattered teen pore is a treat. Add in a basket of horror Easter eggs (Savini beer, anyone?), and even watching in the interaction-free Movie Mode is a lot of schlocky fun.

Life or death is literally in your hands as you flick the analogue stick to avoid hazards in QTEs and make split-second

decisions. And there are an impressive number of pathways in which to desperately keep the entertaining cast alive. Checking the “Paths” section of the menu to see how you're doing can feel satisfying as you realise you made just the right call, or fill you with dread as a missed choice from six hours before means certain death.

The story itself takes a little too long to get going – an hour or two in the middle sags somewhat, ruining the tension – but once the running and screaming begins, things pick up and a wicked sense of humour keeps things haring along nicely. While it may not have the scare factor of the studio's previous games, *The Quarry* is a solid nightmare. **Louise Blain**

Horror royalty David Arquette, Lin Shaye, Ted Raimi and Lance Henriksen were all fully mo-capped for the game.



UNIT: BRAVE NEW WORLD - SEABIRD ONE



RELEASED OUT NOW!

160 minutes CD/download

Publisher Big Finish

AUDIO DRAMA Brigadier

Winifred Bambera (Angela Bruce) is cross. She's broken up with inter-dimensional knight Ancelyn and is considering packing in the soldiering life, when a tempting job offer comes in: take charge of the UK branch of UNIT. No wonder she spends much of this box set – the first of a new '90s-set spin-off – bellowing at people. “WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?” she yells when second-in-command Savarin (Alex Jordan) introduces himself. “FOR PETE'S SAKE!”, she barks at new scientific adviser Louise Rix (Yemisi Oyinloye). Her catchphrase “OH HHH SHAME!” gets a couple of runs out too.

In truth, it's a lot of fun to have Bambera – last seen in 1989's *Who "Battlefield"* – back. The '90s setting also works well; the three stories here have a sci-fi thriller vibe that recalls shows of the era like *The X-Files* or even the long-forgotten *Bugs*. While opener “Rogue State” perhaps leans into the camp Bond-isms too much – it ends with Bambera chasing a cackling villain with a dodgy accent to the Millennium Dome – it's still solidly enjoyable. “Time Flies” is better, with more than a hint of “The Seeds Of Doom”, while “Dark Side Of The Moon” packs in some intriguing SF ideas amid the action. A decent addition to the UNIT franchise. **Will Salmon**





ENGLISH ROSE

★★★★★

RELEASED 15 JULY

150 minutes Podcast

Broadcaster Radio 4/BBC Sounds

AUDIO DRAMA There's something weird about nanny Rose (Corrie's Alexandra Martell), from the minute she steps off the boat to New York without even a carry-on case to her name. But her new employers have had trouble keeping a nanny before, and their little darling needs special care, so they choose to overlook Rose's foibles... until they can't ignore them any more.

My Summer Of Love writer Helen Cross's new five-part drama is part fish-out-of-water horror comedy and part bloody action horror, with a tidy female empowerment thread tying things together. By the end of the first episode, listeners will know exactly what Rose's deal is; *Dracula* fans won't even need to wait that long, because Rose's hometown is Whitby, a detail presented like a sharp nudge in the ribs.

More interesting is the subplot about her employers' secrets, where more subtle, everyday evil lurks. Having Rose face off against predatory art dealers is fun, in a kind of inverse-*Buff* way, so it's a shame that the story soon fully embraces its supernatural side.

Production-wise, it's immaculate: the voice acting is strong, characters distinct, and the Foley enthusiastically lurpy when the plot calls for it. But somehow the story feels incomplete, with the final episode in a rush to put full stops on every storyline in a way that feels abrupt and unsatisfying. **Sarah Dobbs**



Holly Quin, Anirah, Lois Chimimba and Charlie Craggs.

DOCTOR WHO: REDACTED

The [REDACTED] Files

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

219 minutes Podcast

Broadcaster Radio 4/BBC Sounds

AUDIO DRAMA A podcast about a fictional podcast – is that a bit too meta? And after Clive Finch, Larry Nightingale and Elton Pope, have there been more than enough stories about people obsessed with legends of the Doctor and his blue box? Thankfully the answer to both questions is no.

Cleo, Shawna and Abby are the presenters of *The Blue Box Files*, a podcast that investigates sightings of a mysterious police box and the strange events that seem to happen around it. Described as “three queer women” in the promotional material (Cleo is trans, Shawna's a lesbian and Abby is bisexual), the three have varying levels of belief in the conspiracies they discuss, but are drawn into danger when people who've had any contact with the Doctor begin disappearing – redacted from reality. Everyone seems to believe

the Doctor is behind it, but can that be true?

For the first few episodes, *Redacted* is a delight – full of energy and enthusiasm, as three passionate characters with a wonderfully close friendship bounce off and support each other. Unfortunately, this isn't quite enough to sustain it through 10 episodes, and the show begins to drag as the redactions play out, UNIT gets involved and the whole world begins to change – something that isn't conveyed all that well. And while Cleo is undoubtedly the star, the show suffers from the three separate, although the conflict between them, as loyalties and ambitions conflict, feels painfully real.

It would be great to hear more from the three though – maybe in a shorter season? And we're really hoping to see some of the joy and energy heard here back in the main series. **Rhian Drinkwater**

Cleo refers to Sally Salter, another trans woman on the Powell Estate. Sally first appeared in the novellisation of “Rose”.

THE VINYL COUNTDOWN

Our pick of the latest LPs

BELLE

19 AUGUST, SONY MUSIC CLASSICAL

Music is integral to Mamoru Hosoda's anime film about a shy teenage singer. This release includes both instrumental cues and Suzu's songs – with four additional versions in English, as performed by Kylie McNeill for the dub. It comes on cutesy half-pink half-blue vinyl.

GHOSTBUSTERS: AFTERLIFE

OUT NOW, MUSIC ON VINYL

Unsurprisingly, given what a continuity-fest the film is, Rob Simonsen's work harkens back to Elmer Bernstein's 1984 score, in part by using early synth the Ondes Martenot. It comes on Muncher-coloured vinyl (an ectoplasmic light green, like the movie's hydrant-eating ghost).

THE NORTHMAN

22 JULY, SACRED BONES

Robin Carolan and Sebastian Gainsborough swatted up a Viking tale, consulting an ethnographer, drawing on archaic instruments like the tagelharpa (a bowed lyre) and langspil (a drone zither), and using strings to emulate the bullroarer – a plank on a string, whirled around in rituals.

ROGUE ONE

OUT NOW, MONDO

This new Expanded Edition of Michael Giacchino's score for the *Star Wars* prequel adds over an hour of previously unreleased music – 36 tracks in all – across four discs. Featuring moody B&W inner sleeve art and liner notes by the composer, it'll set you back around £90.



PETER CUSHING

As his Dalek movies get a 4K release, we check how much you know about horror's nicest gentleman

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman**, Deputy Editor

QUESTION 1

What are Grand Moff Tarkin's final words?

QUESTION 2

Not counting reused footage, in how many Hammer films did Peter Cushing play a version of Van Helsing: four, five or six?

QUESTION 3

And how many of Hammer's Frankenstein films did Cushing appear in: four, five or six?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Supply the title missing from this movie poster.

QUESTION 5

In *Dr Who & The Daleks*, Cushing's character is first seen reading. What is he reading?

QUESTION 6

Which Cushing movie features creatures which kill people by injecting them with a bone-dissolving enzyme?

QUESTION 7

What miniature collectables was Cushing an enthusiast for?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

Identify this Peter Cushing movie.

QUESTION 9

Name the episode of *The Avengers* in which Cushing guest-starred.

QUESTION 10

Which infamous figure's remains does the Cushing-starring 1965 horror *The Skull* revolve around?

QUESTION 11

In *Revenge Of The Sith*, who played a younger version of Cushing's *Star Wars* character, Grand Moff Tarkin?



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 6



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Identify this Peter Cushing movie.

QUESTION 13

In which TV series did Cushing play a Zennite called Raan?

QUESTION 14

Which role, in which film, did John Carpenter unsuccessfully approach Peter Cushing's agent about him playing?

QUESTION 15

At Cushing's request, a strain of flower was named after his beloved late wife, Helen. What type of flower?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Name the TV series which Peter Cushing is guest-starring in here.

QUESTION 17

Which legendary character did Peter Cushing play in a skit on *The Morecambe & Wise Show*?

QUESTION 18

Who wrote the novella *Whitstable*, in which Cushing is approached for help by a young boy who mixes up the real-life man with his on-screen persona?

QUESTION 19

What do the cast lists of *Scream And Scream Again* and *House Of The Long Shadows* have in common? Hint: three names...

QUESTION 20

Which of Peter Cushing's co-stars remarked that he smelled "like linen and lavender"?

Answers: 1 You may find when ready, 2 Five
3 An issue of *Evangel* 6 Island Of
7 Model soldiers 8 Horror
9 Express 5 Britain Of The
Cybernauts 10 The Marquis de
Sade 11 Wayne Program
12 *Conquered* 13 Space: 1999
14 *Dr. Looney in Holloway* 15 A rose
16 Hammer House Of Horror 17 King
Arthur 18 Stephen Volk 19 *Boat Star*
Vincent Price 20 Cameo Fisher

How did you do?

Which Cushing movie are you?

0-5

Innocent For The Damned

6-10

Right

11-15

The Gorgon

16-19

The Curse Of Frankenstein

20

Star Wars

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

The Rings Of Power
will bind you!

GAME OF THRONES

House Of The Dragon
is here to slay

STRANGER THINGS

Get under Vecna's skin!

AEON FLUX

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— you know, the usual

SFX 356
ON SALE
10 AUG

THE ROAD TO ROGUE ONE BEGINS

ANDOR

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There can be only one Adrian Paul. Fortunately.

Highlander: The Series

Rhian Drinkwater, Freelance Writer

Before you dismiss me with a shake of the head, let me tell you: we were short on quality TV in the '90s. And while I'm not sure *Highlander* will ever be remembered as high quality, it made a big impact on me.

I was introduced to the show by a boyfriend, aged 16, who had the whole run taped off TV. Rather than the beginning, he first showed me season two, episode four, "The Darkness" – a strange choice, as it continues a long-running arc about a group of humans trying to kill immortals, and ends with the death of a major character and the introduction to immortality of another. It worked though, and I was hooked. More than 20 years later, it's still one of my favourite stories.

Returning to the pilot before working our way through the whole run, I laughed as he was able to quote along with lines from the two Highlanders as the torch is passed from the film to the show – "I am Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod"; "I am Connor MacLeod, same clan, different vintage." By the end of the six seasons I was also able to quote large chunks by heart.

I've always been a sucker for Dramatic Emotional Moments, and this show is full of them. Leaning into the emotions and consequences of immortality right from the start, it continues the storyline from the original film (ignoring the ending, and sequels): there are immortals on Earth who can only be killed by beheading; there is a Game which is now coming to an end as they slowly sword-fight each other to death; in the end, there can be only one. Duncan MacLeod (Adrian Paul) is the Highlander, 400 years old and trying desperately to remain moral and loyal as the Game proceeds and past acquaintances return. He's not short on girlfriends, either, in the past or the present.

Arcs and storylines got more involved across the seasons, and it sometimes felt like Duncan couldn't turn a corner without confronting an immortal from his past, yet it only got truly ridiculous at the end, hampered by production and actor scheduling issues. Season five should have been the last, but a final, shorter season six was commissioned at the last minute; predictably, quality took a hit. Ignore those final, ignominious episodes though and you've got a show full of heart – and not short on heads. ●

Rhian still sobs when she hears "Dust In The Wind".

Fact Attack!

→ When one immortal kills another, they gain their powers in the orgasmic Quickening, with predictably curvy facial expressions.

→ The nature of the funding for the show meant that each season was set half in Paris and half in the US (although filmed in Canada).

→ Recurring immortals included Hugh Fitzcarrin (Roger Daltrey) and Xavier St Cloud (Roland Gift of Fine Young Cannibals).

→ The youngest immortal seen is Kenny. As a child, he uses his apparent vulnerability to lure parental figures, then kill them.

→ Big Finish produced two seasons of *Highlander* audio adventures based on the series; sadly, they're now out of print.

CHRISTOPHER ECCLESTON

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

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